



Gu Fang Bu Zi Shang Volume 01

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Before You Read (or Reference)

In my attempt to romanise the different ranks of the Gu Fang hierarchy, I have used various words from the peerage system and then updated them. Others, such as the servant hierarchy is common knowledge. I do try to romanise the language as much as possible, while keeping the basic meaning to avoid confusion. If you still get lost in the midst of the rank naming, just get into this story (this part can serve as a reference). Hopefully it'll all clear out later.

Nobility Ranks

- King (part of the “Royal House”, lives in the “Royal Residence”)
- Prince: It seems that usually only the inheritor(s) of the throne will be called the Prince in this novel. (Part of the “Royal House”, lives in the “Royal Residence.”) There’s a princess too...
- Duke: Similar in rank to Prince, may or may not have royal blood connections. In other words, dukes may be princes or people from recognised families. Being called a “duke” seems to give more military advantage. This is replacing the “wang” prefix and suffix, e.g Jing Anwang = Duke of Jing-An; Wangye = Duke. He lives in a “...Ducal Residence”. People of similar lineage (i.e his sons and daughters) can be grouped as “House of...” (The Chinese for this is the same, but it doesn’t make sense in English if only one is used)
- The wife of the duke (formerly “wangfei”) will be the Duchess.
- The duke’s son(s) will be given his father’s subsidiary titles, e.g. “marquess” or “earl” etc.
- Scholar: Not really nobility. Usually a commoner/peasant who has gotten the King’s respect due to high placing in national exam. Supposedly all men, but in fiction and probably history, there have been women who cross dress to study and earn these titles. Top scholars tend to be awarded an “official” rank and often became governors of small provinces or military commanders. Sort of like the “count” role in the peerage system.
- Official: All of the above, except women (e.g duchess) and the King. Basically, they can all serve in court. The royal court seems to generally be divided into two wings - the left and the right... (But that's not really important to the story right now)

Military Ranks

- [Military] General: The strongest warrior(s) and/or main commander(s) of the war. This person may go to the front lines and fight. There is also sometimes a “Main General.”
- [Military] Advisor: Someone who doesn’t usually go to fight (but may go to battlefield if needed). Basically someone who thinks of all the tactics to use and does the planning etc. I’m using the word “advisor” to cover both strategists and tacticians.
- [Military] Commander: A person who commands an army or part of it, to war when needed.
- Warrior: A soldier who is recognised for his strength in battle.
- Soldier: A fighter in the war.

**The King is supposed to have absolute control over the military. In Gu Fang, the term “military” is used synonymously to “army”.

Servant Ranks

- Upper Servants: Housekeeper, Lady’s Maid, Valet
- Senior Servants (Middle/Lower upper, requires some skill): Nurse, Cook, Seamstress
- Under Servants (manual labour): Housemaids (e.g. Kitchenmaid, Chamber Maid, Laundry Maid), Footmen, Eunuchs

Addressing Others (if not by name/politer form)

- The Master and Mistress of any Residence or owners of shops will be addressed as “Sir” and/or “My Lady”. (Sir ~ and Lady ~ /Madam ~) Their sons and daughters would be addressed as “Mister” and “My Lady”.
- The direct master of any servant may be addressed as “Master” or “My Lady”.
- All guests will be greeted as “Mister”/“Sir” or “Miss”/“Madam”/“My Lady” or by title. (less polite/more polite)
- Housekeepers will be acknowledged as “Mrs ~” regardless of marital status. In Gu Fang, the housekeeper usually takes on the name of the Residence or House, e.g. “Hua Housekeeper” (literal translation). She will be acknowledged as “Mrs Hua”.
- The nurse will be acknowledged as “Mother ~”. Sometimes older (under) maids may also be acknowledged as a “mother”.
- Important maids may be addressed as “Sis ~” by younger maids, or as “Miss ~” by older maids.
- When referring by third person, not by title, after all (possessive) pronouns or articles must be capitalised, i.e “the Lady” (specifically referring a lady), “his Master” etc.
- Contrary to proper peerage address, the King is still often addressed as “King” instead of “Sire” or “Your Majesty”, while the Queen is still often addressed as “Queen”. Likewise, “Duke”, “Duchess”, “Princess” etc.

*Servants often inherit their master’s family name.

Naming (sort of like honorifics – this isn’t that important, so skip if needed)

- -Boy: This is actually the antonym of “lao” (old) but this nickname method is usually used for men and stereotypically, tired middle-aged men (though a lot of teenagers use it too nowadays). Therefore the use of “boy” is the same sort of off-putting, belittling, but at the same time endearing, as the use of “lao”.
- Xiao-: Literally means “small”. A form of endearment. Think of this as “-chan” and “-kun” (Japanese) honorifics. In historical terms, the addition of this character does give a slave-like quality to it, especially to women’s names. However, I tend to not keep this prefix as it makes names sound too similar, especially for non-Chinese speakers. Besides, a single character for a name, e.g “Hong” already gives a poor impression, as richer families tend to give their children compound names (more than one character, e.g. “Pingting”).
- -‘er: This character doesn’t really mean anything on its own (though it does seem to slur the character before it). This is also a form of endearment. Think of this as a “-y” or “-ie” in English, e.g Maddison goes to Maddie. I usually keep this suffix as is, because I don’t like modifying the pinyin of names.
- A-: This is a common addition to single character names. It strongly hints peasantry in general, the poorer farmers. Not quite so in modern times though.
- (Older) Sis: This is an endearing way of addressing older girls (younger than 25 I’d say) by a younger girl. Think of this as the “-neechan” (Japanese) honorific. I did not keep it in pinyin (“-jie” or “jiejie”) to avoid confusion of Chu Beijie’s name. There doesn’t seem to be many cases in Gu Fang where an older girl calls a younger girl, a “(younger) sis” (“meimei”) anyway and it’s easy to figure out when they do. When two girls say that they’re like “sisters,” that means they’re best friends. Funny how a lot of people don’t get along with their blood-related sisters, even in China.
- Brother: Could be younger or older. Could be blood related or not. “Bro” is a bit too informal in this case (not that “sis” isn’t, but “bro” doesn’t quite picture familiar but somewhat formal relationship).

Book One

"A Sinful Encounter with Destiny"

Chapter 01

July, Gui Le territory.

The sun blazed high in the sky, so fierce that the trees on both sides of the road seemed to have bowed down in shame.

Four or five travellers, who could no longer stand the scorching heat, were huddled under the shade of the tree, desperately trying to cool themselves. Because of this, the old man with a small tea booth by the unpaved road had a few more customers than usual.

"A cup of tea." A traveller carefully took out his wallet and fished out a few coins, placing it on the table, while fanning himself vigorously.

"Here, a cup of tea for you to soothe your liver and cool the heat." The old man brought the tea and smiled at him. "It's a hot day. Where are you headed to, Mister?"

"Yes, this demon of a day is indeed hot enough to toast one to death." Just one sip of tea seemed to appease his dry, depleted throat. He seemed slightly happier and said, "I'm just hurrying to deliver stock to the border. Sigh, ever since Dong Lin started messing with the border, it's been hard for us traders to earn a living. Luckily the Marquess of Jing-An is pushing that Bei-What's-His-Name away. Otherwise, I would've never known when to go there."

"Yeah, the Marquess of Jing-An is amazing!"

"I know who you're talking about, he's the brother of the King of Dong Lin. He's strong too."

The nearby people laughed. "Who cares about strength? He still got forced back home when he opposed the Marquess of Jing-An, eh?" He drained the remaining content of his cup and placed a few more coins on the table. "Another cup please, Sir!"

Hearing that, the tea seller nodded. "I heard that he's never lost a battle - totally worth his title of being Gui Le's strongest commander."

Suddenly a voice interrupted, “You dare mention the Marquess of Jing-An? He’s currently labelled as the traitor of Gui Le.”

This struck the tea drinkers crowd like lightning. Their mouths dazedly dropped open.

The tea seller broke the silence. “What are you saying? The Marquess of Jing-An...”

“Do all of you not know?” The newcomer sat down and used his sleeves to fan himself. “I just came out of the city yesterday. Apparently he attempted to assassinate the King and has now escaped out of the capital city. At the moment, the King has commanded everyone to capture him. I heard that the reward is pretty good too.”

“But didn’t he just stabilise the borderline situation and was returning to the capital to collect his rewards?”

“Heh, isn’t it strange. On the very night he was returning to the capital, he tried to assassinate the King. Guess what weapon he used?” The newcomer was dramatising the news, as most of them had their attention on him.

“Must be a precious sword,” someone guessed.

“Don’t listen to this nonsense,” others argued, “There’s no way I’d believe that the Marquess of Jing-An would betray us. He’s Gui Le’s most loyal official, there’s no way he’d break the law.”

The newcomer saw the others’ suspicious looks and stroke his beard. “He used the Precious Heimo Sword, which was personally bestowed to him by the King. And you know, any damage inflicted by that precious sword, no matter how small, will leave a nasty black scar which will never fade.”

“But...”

In the midst of their debating, they suddenly heard hooves approaching.

A carriage, probably an ordinary merchant’s, had arrived; its curtains tightly drawn. The driver was a man with huge muscles. He threw down two coins, yelling, “Ye old man! Gimme some tea!”

“Coming!”

“This damn day is too hot!”

“That’s right, that’s right. Feel free to cool down under the tree before going on your way. We’re discussing about the Marquess of Jing-An.”

“Tch. I’m only interested in business, not some royalty or political creep.” He gulped down the rest of his cup noisily and brought out a huge water container. “Fill that up, I gotta go now.”

The seller hurriedly filled the water container.

The man grabbed the container, got on the horse which neighed once, before moving forward.

Inside the horse carriage, Pingting finally opened her eyes, against the endless bumps of the unpaved road.

It was a humid day and sweat was dripping down her neck. Her eyes were narrowed, as they tried to adjust to the light.

Her head was really sore and pangs of dizziness rose, like waves threatening to consume her.

Where am I? Pingting looked at herself absentmindedly, then around her, and seemed to be fullyawaken now.

The memory of a scene, full of fire and cries of battle and fighting returned to her.

“Pingting, wait outside the city. We’ll go in to save Father.”

“Then...Master, we’ll meet again on the cliff at dawn.”

Where was the Duke? Master? And what about that mischievous, always-causing-trouble, Dongzhuo?

She remembered that after making the promise, she had set out for the cliff. In her most recent memory, she was definitely already at the cliff. And out of sudden, the back of her head throbbed painfully once before her eyes fade to black...

“You awake?” The curtains were pushed aside, revealing a peering man’s face, “You should’a woken ages ago. Any longer, and Zhang Boy would’a beaten ya to death.”

Are these people human trafficking troupe? Pingting studied them carefully.

Could it be that I’ve been caught by human traffickers when Master needs me the most? The number of times Pingting had left the Residence alone throughout her life was scarce and during this exact moment where she was urgently needed, she JUST had to be caught by the human traffickers.

“Okay, I’m gonna ask ya somethin’.” The man sat inside the carriage and took out the gag in Pingting’s mouth. They must have had placed it in her mouth to stop her from screaming for help in case she woke up along the journey. He gave her an intimidating glare, “If you dun’ tell meh the truth, I’ll feed ya to the wolves.”

Pingting nearly laughed at this child-like threat. Why would she be scared? She’d been serving the Marquess of Jing-An, He Xia, since small and she was the only woman who could follow him on his outings. Although she was young, she’d already seen a lot of battles.

Pingting didn’t wait for the man to ask his question, asking one of her own instead. “Did you capture me in the city?”

The man looked surprised at her relaxed expression and chuckled, not angrily. “Yeah.”

“How long did I sleep for?”

“Two days and a half.”

Pingting went pale when she heard this, stunned in shock.

If she had been sleeping for the last two days, then the king's soldiers would have begun searching around the capital, making it very difficult for her Master and the others to stay at the agreed place, near the cliffs. Her heart sped up as she asked, "Where are you taking me?"

"To the..." the man suddenly stopped, realising something was wrong. "Eh? Yer know I'm the one askin' questions ere, right?" He gave her a ferocious expression. "Say, which rich family have you escaped from, runaway wife? Where's your home?"

Runaway wife?

Pingting hesitated, lowering her head and studied herself.

Although she was only a servant of her residence, her Master had always cherished her and so she'd gotten things that were even more expensive than the ladies of normal households. Her clothes looked expensive and she had been riding away from the city at an odd hour so the trafficker had naturally thought that she had run away from her husband.

No wonder the trafficker hadn't thrown her out in the last two days, he had probably seen some value in her.

Pingting shook her head and laughed, "I'm just a maid, not a runaway wife from a wealthy family."

"Tch, since when did servants get silk clothes?"

Pingting debated over what to say in her head carefully. It was highly likely that the King had already ordered all citizens to hunt for the people of Jing-An Ducal Residence, so she decided not to give away her real identity. So instead, she rolled her eyes and said, "I escaped out of the city to see my lover, but because I wanted to look pretty, I stole some of My Lady's clothes." Gui Le was a somewhat noisy place and therefore a lot of women really would sneak out to see their lovers.

The man frowned immediately at this and threw open the curtains, "Zhang Boy! Com'over here!"

"Coming." There seemed to be more than one trafficker, on the other carriage.

Not long after, a chubby face peered in from the window. "Fu Erge, wassup?"

So his name was Fu Erge.

"Wassup yer head! Didn't ya say this girl was a runaway wife from a rich family and could be swapped for a lot of money?" Fu Erge glared at Pingting and jabbed an accusing finger at her, "She's just a servant, dammit! And she slept for two days!"

Zhang Boy scratched his head and studied Pingting carefully. Then he laughed, "Fu Erge, don't be angry. What's done is done. She'll probably have some value anyway."

"Oh, so ya can sell off this rubbish?" sneered the man, jabbing an accusing finger at Pingting's nose.

True, Pingting's appearance certainly wasn't at all pretty. Even in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, her looks at most, had been average, probably even more common. One could only say that she was "tidy".

But everyone in the Jing-An Ducal Residence recognised how important she was.

However, as the stranger jabbed a finger at her and claimed she was worthless, she couldn't help rolling her eyes.

Fu Erge coughed two times and faked a depressed tone. "Ne'er mind, she should be at least worth around fifty coins. This robbing bitch really gave me false hope; I even let her stay in my private carriage for two 'ole days. Dammit, take her to the other carriage with the others."

The moment she entered the other carriage, a terrible odour flooded her senses and Pingting realised why Fu Erge had been so angry.

In comparison to the first carriage, this one was tattered and crowded, dirty and sweltering hot.

There were seven or eight girls already crammed inside. Their hands had also been tied behind their back like Pingting and they were gagged, with fear evident in their eyes. All eyes landed sympathetically on Pingting, as she was now a new addition to these cluster of unfortunate girls.

"Move over! Here's another one." Zhang Boy pushed Pingting inside and began to ungag the girls, "At the moment, we're in the wilderness, so I'll let you talk. Some of you are bound to die in this heat anyway. Be good and stay put, okay!" After saying this, he ran off, probably to drive the carriage or something.

Pingting stumbled from Zhang Boy's push and sat down in a corner with much difficulty.

"Cough, cough...cough..." The carriage was shaking so hard and her throat felt very sore, so she'd coughed a few more times along the journey.

Suddenly, unease rippled in her.

Have I not recovered from that time I went with Master to the doctors? Pingting frowned, closing her eyes and leaning her head against the wall of the carriage.

As she felt a bit more comfortable, she couldn't help worrying.

Jing-An Ducal Residence, the place she'd been living all her life, was probably reduced to ashes right?

Prince Su, no, he was now the new king. The King's hatred of the military-rich House of Jing-An grew day by day. Recently her Master had triumphed in the war and the King had finally decided to take him down, framing her Master for rebellion on the day of his return.

Luckily the House of Jing-An had been wary, so the damage was not too great.

Her Master should have already found a good escape route by now.

Not that she would know where they'd hide but that was okay, as they'd be safe in a place where no one could guess. Their pursuers won't know where to look and therefore will never find them.

Sound suddenly erupted, as most girls were crying over their misfortune. Pingting opened her eyes and looked around slowly.

Yep, they're all really pretty. I should be the ugliest one here, right?

Human traffickers were always after pretty girls. They could be sold off as a concubine for a high price. Pingting thought of Fu Erge, and how he estimated her value of fifty coins and chuckled. It was definitely easy enough to drown him with the amount of money her Master gave her every week.

Who knew what expression Fu Erge would make if he knew who she was.

"Um Sis..." A girl beside Pingting touched her shoulder shyly, "Did you get captured by them too?"

She was really cute, no wonder she'd been caught by the human traffickers. She nodded. "Yeah."

"Aren't you scared?"

"No."

The little girl looked at her in surprise. "You're not scared?"

Pingting saw that she was probably going to say something else, so she began first. "What's your name?"

"My...name's Qing. What's yours?"

"I'm Hong." She automatically lied about her name. She definitely wouldn't use such a fancy name like 'Bai Pingting' but it wouldn't do to have no name at all.

"Okay Sis, then..."

"Do you know where we're going?" She interrupted Qing again, taking advantage of her situation. She wasn't scared, just a little excited. It was a bit like accompanying her Master, figuring out the enemy's motive from the different clues. Except this time, she was fighting alone.

"According to that fat guy and mean guy, we would be sold in Dong Lin."

In the enemy's country? Pingting's eyebrows creased even more.

Her Master's last battle at the border was against the troops of Dong Lin. Pingting had the Dong Lin army purposely being directed into the mountains and then by controlling the river flow, the enemy were forced to full retreat in the threat of a flood. Back then, her Master had said, "Now the whole army knows that we have a female military advisor. When we get back, I'll get Father to reward you. What would you like this time?"

If she was recognised in Dong Lin, the consequences would be...

It seemed that using the human trafficker's carriage to escape the King's wrath was impossible. She'd need to find a good time to escape, leave their carriage and then find her Master by herself.

In the midst of her thinking, her body suddenly heaved forward. Pingting felt her energy draining away as she began to cough again.

"Cough, cough..."

"Sis..." Qing looked at her worriedly.

"I'm fine." She had finally stopped but she was left with a foul, blood-like taste in her mouth. Pingting suddenly froze, did she just cough up blood again?

First things first, how could she escape?

She wasn't unhealthy, but her illness was slowly eating away at her. She hadn't told her Master back in the battlefield, because she didn't want to worry him. And then that incident happened the night they went back.

Her thoughts were still a mess, no wonder her illness had gotten worse.

Pingting thought for a little longer and sighed, "Fine, Dong Lin it is." She had decided to go to Dong Lin with the human traffickers.

After all, the command to capture the one thousand members of the Jing-An Ducal Residence was only valid on Gui Le territory.

The enemy's country wasn't a bad option — as long as her identity remained a secret.

A couple of days later, the carriage had arrived in Dong Lin.

But the human traffickers were not stupid to sell the girls at the poor villages on the outskirts of Dong Lin, so they continued to travel for a couple of days. When they arrived at capital of Dong Lin, Moen, they forced the girls off the carriage, have them cleaned at an inn and gave them fresh clothes to wear.

Despite the war, trades of women from the other countries weren't unusual. There seemed to be a section for human traffickers in almost every major city's trading markets. Each of them was pushed on to a stage, one by one, and auctioned.

Pingting was the most unpopular and was placed towards the end of the line. The silk clothes she had originally been wearing had been given to Qing, who was labelled for a high price.

"Beauties from Gui Le! Hey, beautiful women from Gui Le!"

Pingting thought of how she was the most important maid at Gui Le's Jing-An Ducal Residence and how she was being sold like a complete nobody now. She shook her head and laughed bitterly.

No wonder people always say that life changes so quickly.

She stood on stage and studied her fellow girls, most of them now sold. The one who bought Qing was a painter and he looked very kind, very rich. Qing was quite noisy, yelling “Sis! Sis!” refusing to let go of Pingting’s hand.

But Pingting knew that Qing, who came from a poor family, was actually very lucky to be sold into a nice family. Even her, if she hadn’t been saved by her Master back then, she would’ve died of hunger long ago on the streets.

“Go, don’t be scared.” Pingting patted her hand, eyes following her as she left.

She was the last one to be sold.

Being ugly really put her at a disadvantage this time. The human traffickers tried to persuade the audience and finally sold her off to a housekeeper looking for an under servant, for forty cents.

If her Master knew that she’d been sold for forty cents, he would have died laughing.

She was then brought over to the well-decorated front door of a huge residence. “This is the main entrance, got that? You under servants should be using the side door though.” The housekeeper pointed at a sign overhead.

Pingting looked up and read the big characters on the sign, “Hua Residence”.

Luckily it wasn't the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence, or she would've tried to run.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie, was the famous younger brother of Dong Lin's king. He was the best military commander of Dong Lin — and one of the people who’d retreated in the last battle.

“Yeah, not bad, at least you can read.” The Missus Hua nodded while taking Pingting to the so-called side door. “From now on, this is your new home. Master and his daughter are both very kind so if you do your work properly, you’ll be treated very well.”

Just like that, Hua Residence gained another normal maid.

Pingting's main role was laundry work. It was shocking to her that there’d be a day where she needed to wash so many clothes.

Back in Jing-An Ducal Residence, although her rank was a maid, she was like her Master's younger sister. She never did anything more than bringing tea or accompanying her Master while painting or play the qin. As for her own clothes, she had always given them to her maids to wash.

“Finally done.” She took the painfully cleaned clothes and hung them up in the patio to dry. Pingting muttered, “Geez Pingting, don’t you know that you shouldn’t slack off with your daily duties? Now do you know what being a maid really means, right? This isn’t the first time you’ve slacked off.” She smiled, showing two dimples.

Her black eyes shone, revealing a hidden radiance that overwhelmed her surroundings. Although her looks

were fairly plain, her expression had a sort of graceful youth about it.

If Fu Erge had seen Pingting just then, he'd totally regret selling her off for only forty cents.

The people of Hua Residence were kind to their workers. Mrs Hua noticed that Pingting coughed a lot and even bought her some medicine. Though it didn't exactly work, she did feel a little better after drinking some.

Pingting secretly waited for her recovery, but one small incident, ruined all her plans to escape.

Chapter 02

The weather was relatively good, the sun was hidden behind the clouds and it wasn't as hot as the last two days.

Pingting had already finished washing the assigned clothes and was wiping the sweat from her face when Mother Chen approached her.

"Hong, are you busy?"

"I've just finished washing. What do you need, Mother Chen? I've done yesterday's washing too, except I still need to fold them..."

"Don't worry about that." Mother Chen followed Pingting to the washing line and chuckled, "You can put that down for now, I need to talk to you."

Pingting put down the bucket of washing, "Yes?"

"You fixed the two holes in my clothes, didn't you?"

"I saw them so I did do the mending. Is it no good?"

Mother Chen gave another chuckle, "It's not 'no good'. I could hardly tell that there was a hole there! I never guessed you had such nimble fingers!" She grabbed Pingting's hand, studied it and asked, "Why didn't you tell us about your skill? I'll tell you this, My Lady's wedding is coming up and we're in a rush to prepare the clothes. Only three girls in our entire Residence are proficient with needlework, so I'm worried we won't finish in time. From today on, you don't need to do manual work anymore, come and help sew!" She was Lady Hua's nurse, so she was extremely excited when it came to her wedding.

"This is..." These days, her health had greatly improved and she was planning to escape soon. It would've been a lot easier to escape if she was still a laundry maid.

"This is what? Do you still want to do manual labour?" Mother Chen patted Pingting's hand, "It's a great opportunity. I'll tell the housekeeper about this. Inside you go and don't worry about anything else for now." She bounced away happily, before Pingting could answer.

Pingting had no choice but to pack her things up and go inside.

The Hua family was one of the most famous commercial families of Dong Lin. The head of the family had one daughter and so her wedding was extremely important. Her clothes required at least four seamstresses and now they had a new addition.

As a seamstress, Pingting's food and clothing had greatly improved from the time when she was still a manual labourer. However, Pingting had been spoiled for a long time in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, so she took no notice in the changes. Though her lifestyle had very much downgraded, she was flexible and therefore she didn't complain.

For unknown reasons, the seamstresses had been scheduled near Lady Hua's building.

"What beautiful fabric, I wish I could wear something like this when I marry. I can't imagine how beautiful I'll be!" The seamstresses sat inside, in their own corner. Their heads were bent over while their needles weaved across the fabric.

"Don't be stupid, how lucky can you get?"

Ruo'er, the girl who spoke first, had been promoted to a seamstress at the same time as Pingting. Seeing how Zihua was mocking her, she retorted, "How can you be so sure about that?"

"Okay, okay, hurry up and get back to work." Mother Chen was in the room too and seeing how Pingting was so absorbed in her work, she couldn't resist tip-toeing over to see what she was doing. "Wow! That's amazing needlework!"

Pingting jumped back in surprise, momentarily losing control of her needle, pricking herself.

"Hong, your hands really are amazing." Mother Hong took Pingting's sewing and studied the lively, realistic phoenix. She had worked in the Hua Residence for many years yet this was the first time something had sparked her interest. Suddenly, she had a thought. "This technique...I doubt you could find two with the same capabilities in Dong Lin. Yeah, I think your phoenix's wings is not typically like Dong Lin's traditions, I think it's more like..."

Pingting's heart thumped and she laughed nervously while taking back her stitching. "I don't exactly understand, but it just has to look good right?"

Her sewing in Gui Le was considered spectacular as well. Although the Jing-An Ducal Residence didn't particularly announce it, there had been some private requests for her needlework.

Pingting was also a lazy person, so she refused to sew any more except for a few objects for her Master. This meant that there weren't many traces of her sewing in the Jing-An Ducal Residence left around.

While Mother Chen wasn't looking, she unpicked the wings of her phoenix. She was just about to rest her eyes when a beautiful girl entered the room. Her body was slender, she had huge pondering eyes and her nose was a perfect bridge. She wore an embroidered light purple dress and a necklace of pearls glittered around her neck.

Mother Chen hurried stood up and asked, "Why are you here, My Lady?"

So she was Lady Hua. Pingting had been outside doing manual labour, so this was the first time she had actually seen the Lady. All of the maids stood up.

“Oh Nurse, you’re here too?”

“Of course, these are My Lady’s wedding clothes after all, shouldn’t I be seeing everything thoroughly? Look at this sequin, I took a long time picking it out from...”

Lady Hua seemed to have lost interest in Mother Chen’s word. She glanced at the red fabric and annoyance crossed her eyes. She turned towards the maids and eyed them, as if searching for someone.

She carefully measured everyone with her eyes, finally letting her eyes rest on Pingting.

“You, come with me.” Lady Hua pointed at Pingting and walked away, not waiting for an answer.

“Me?” Pingting pointed to herself in surprise and looked at Mother Chen.

“My Lady told you to go, so what are you standing there for? Go.” Mother Chen lightly pushed her shoulder.

What does Lady Hua need me for? Don’t tell me...she knows my real identity?

Pingting followed her into the main room of the Lady’s building and a nice fragrance in the air made her relax. Pingting took a deep breath, thinking, *Sir Hua is really nice to his daughter. This sort of iced fragrance is a luxury that only royalty can afford.*

Lady Hua gestured to Pingting to come into the room, “Come here”.

Pingting followed and Lady Hua threw her some clothes, commanding, “Put these on.”

The clothes were very fine, a display of exquisite workmanship. It was obvious that these were the Lady’s very own clothes.

She saw the confusion on Pingting’s face, clicked her tongue and smiled. “You see, your figure resembled mine most. Geez, I wasn’t planning to look for a replacement but Dong’er just had to get sick.”

“Perfect!” Lady helped Pingting into the clothes and made her turn around. She looked really happy when she said, “your body shape is exactly the same as mine. You’ll be thought of as a beauty, so long no one sees your face.” Lady was naively romantic in a way that she actually believed her words held no ill intentions.

Pingting giggled nervously, not knowing what to do.

“What’s your name?”

“Hong.”

“Hong, I need a favour.” Lady Hua took a deep breath and whispered, “If you successfully pretend to be me, I’ll greatly award you. If you mess up...let’s just say I’ll punish you like hell. Also, don’t you dare tell

anyone about this! If anyone else learns of it, I'll get Mrs Hua to whip you!" Her words were threatening but there was no force in her tone.

Pingting didn't know whether to laugh or not. "My Lady, I promise not to tell anyone. I'll do what My Lady asks."

"Hmm, that's good. Don't be scared, I'm not a violent person actually." Lady Hua paused before saying, "I need you to go with me outside the city and we will be going to a shrine on a hill. When we get there, I need you to put on my clothes and play the qin, without a fuss. Oh yeah, I forgot, can you play qin?" She had only just remembered such an important detail.

Pingting saw Lady Hua look at her anxiously and couldn't help nodding, "A little..."

"That's fine." Lady Hua repeated the task again, finally adding, "Don't worry. If anything goes wrong, there's still me." She patted her chest and fluttered her eyelashes. She looked really cute.

Pingting knew immediately that she was going to see her lover. She felt sorry for her fiancé, who was going to marry such a bold and reckless girl.

The carriage had been prepared by afternoon. The housekeeper was already waiting outside. Though her father loved her dearly, she was still the Lady of a big family, so she didn't get many chances to leave the Residence. This meant the times she could see her lover were limited, and therefore she was very excited and nervous right now.

"Hong will accompany me on the carriage," Lady declared when they came out. Lady Hua led Pingting inside the carriage. Lady Hua's requests were usually unusual due to her spoiled nature so her bringing in a seamstress did not surprise the other people at all.

Pingting was wearing her usual clothes and the clothes she was going to change into were placed in a bag. This outing reminded her of the ones she went with her Master. Seeing how Lady Hua was so cute and naive, her energy came back and she was eager to help wholeheartedly.

Luckily the carriage was quite big, so the two girls had plenty of room.

"I've never seen you before."

Pingting touched her hair, "I used to be outside washing clothes. How was Lady supposed to see me?"

"Washing clothes? That's tiring." Lady Hua wriggled in her spot. She put a piece of Osmanthus cake in her mouth and held up another piece. "Want some?"

Pingting liked sweets too. Her master always commanded to save some for Pingting, whenever they had nice sweets. Even today, she couldn't help nodding at the sight of Osmanthus cake, "Yes, please."

Lady Hua laughed and placed some in Pingting's mouth.

The moment the cake entered her mouth, the faint fragrance of Osmanthus played at the tip of her tongue. Pingting had been treated as a normal maid for exactly two months and her face was absolutely delighted

when she ate this delicacy. “It’s really good.”

As the two people talked, they gradually began to warm up to each other.

Soon, the carriage had left the city gates.

The carriage was put down and Mrs Hua respectfully beckoned, “My Lady, we’ve arrived.”

Lady Hua answered back and led Pingting outside. A monk, who’d been waiting, welcomed Lady Hua inside. It looked like the Hua family were regular visitors.

The housekeeper and the footmen were not allowed to go inside – only Pingting and Lady Hua were allowed to do so. They locked the door behind them.

“Mrs Hua occasionally looks through the window, so put on my clothes, sit there and play the qin.” The Lady glowered, “Remember, don’t pause for too long. If they can’t hear the qin, the monks and Mrs Hua might get suspicious and come in to check on you.”

She said this while hurriedly putting on her pre-prepared scholar clothes. She wiped the makeup off her face, instantly transforming into a handsome man. She gave her original clothes to Pingting and winked. She was very fast so she must’ve done the same thing before.

“I’m going. I’ll be back when the time’s right.” She went to a corner and somehow opened a secret passage, adding smugly, “Only him and I know about this door, no one else.”

Pingting had also seen secret passageways in Jing-An Ducal Residence. It seemed that every big house would have some so she couldn’t help smiling and shaking her head, while Lady Hua’s eager figure disappeared.

She sat where she was asked to, hands lightly touching the qin.

The strings beneath Pingting’s five fingers had a welcoming touch.

She loved to play the qin. The faster the notes were, the more it resembles top-quality wine; which possesses the ability to intoxicate the drinker fully.

In Jing-An Ducal Residence, she was a legendary girl. Not many had personally seen her before, but everyone knew of her battle tactics, needlework and her spectacular qin skills...

Even the King knew that there was an all-rounded maid working for the Duke of Jing-An.

Zeng...

Pingting lightly plucked a single string, leaving the bass note hanging in the air like a bewitching appetiser before a grand feast.

Deep, not blunt. Light, yet highly melodic.

After the deep notes came a happy high pitched melody. It was like a graceful egrets flapping their mighty wings, soaring over a lush green forest at daybreak.

The corners of Pingting's mouth twitched into a smile, as her fingers danced across the strings. The music continued to soar, leaving its listeners to sigh in pleasure.

She was already tired after a piece. Pingting reached for her handkerchief and wiped the sweat away from her face. She remembered what Lady Hua had told her and gave a bitter smile. *"She said that you must keep playing the qin, even until your hand breaks from the tiredness. That just shows how little she knows about qin."*

Suddenly she heard a man's voice outside the door.

"I have never heard such heavenly music in my entire life. May I see the divine face of the Lady who is able to play such music?" His voice sounded well-educated and made one feel relaxed.

This person must have been standing outside for a long time, waiting for me to finish this piece. He must be someone who knows a lot about music.

Pingting immediately felt slightly flustered because she had temporarily forgotten her orders. *"Geez Pingting, just what are you doing in the enemy's country? At the moment, the Lady is seeing her lover, so if this person comes in, our covers will be blown."*

She used her thumb to gently pluck a string. However, before she could refuse, that person suddenly cut in, "My Lady's qin sound is full of regret. As it seems that you do not wish to see me again, then I can only wait for a destined day."

Such a polite gentleman.

Pingting waited for a moment, carefully listened, and she slowly began to smile. Silence. She tiptoed to the window and peered out. No one was there.

"Has he already left?" A look of penitence flashed in her eyes as her pulse began to calm down.

While Pingting looked out the window, she saw that Mrs Hua was looking her way and hurriedly lowered her head.

By evening, Lady Hua had come back through the secret passage. Her face was flushed and she looked as if she had a really happy day. Lady Hua and Pingting swapped clothes and informed Mrs Hua that they could go back to the Residence.

In the carriage, Lady Hua chattered to Pingting about her lover in a lively manner. When she got to the happiest moments, she couldn't help covering her mouth and laughing merrily.

Pingting saw how happy she was and felt really happy for her.

"Sigh, the day passed too quickly." Then Lady Hua sighed again and said, "Wouldn't it be nice if I didn't have to marry?"

Pingting thought about how strange that was. “Sir really cares about My Lady, so why did he engage you to the Chen family without consulting your feelings first?”

Lady Hua’s face darkened at the mention of marriage. “Daddy may love me, but this business is in competition with the Xu family. There’s no way he’d let me marry the son of the person he hates the most. Don’t tell this to Daddy or he’ll make me marry even earlier.”

“My Lady, your wedding is rapidly approaching. You won’t be able to hide it much longer.

“Yeah I know...” Lady Hua sighed and looked at Pingting. Suddenly she had another thought and grabbed Pingting’s hand, pleading, “If you don’t finish my wedding clothes, doesn’t that mean I don’t have to marry? It’s a good idea, just make a small hole in my wedding clothes every day and make Mother Chen and them work more, please?” She fluttered her eyelashes, clearly pleased with herself.

Pingting laughed and rolled her eyes at this childish idea. She was about to tell Lady Hua that that wouldn’t work when the carriage stopped.

A crowd of unknown men circled them and slowly closed in. There was about ten of them, and they were all on horses.

These men were wearing peasant clothes but their expression was far too educated, while their actions were too collected.

The sun was starting to set and the Hua carriage was still outside the city. There were no other travellers on the road. The footmen knew that if they were attacked by bandits, there was no way to defend themselves. The housekeeper finally plucked the courage, barely managing to stay at front of the carriage, her chubby face twitching as a young man, who seemed to be the boss, got off his horse. “Mister, my Lady is in this carriage. We were just returning from the shrine so we have donated most of our money. There’s not much left...”

The young man was carrying an air of importance and he saw how the housekeeper had stammered so badly. He laughed, “Missus, you have misunderstood me. I am here on behalf of my Master.” Turning to the carriage, he spoke again, “Please excuse my rudeness, My Lady, and accept this.”

Lady Hua wasn’t sure what exactly was going on but she was very much amused, “What are you going to give me?”

“My Lady’s qin technique was spectacular. Master has asked me to give this guqin to My Lady.”

Pingting made a small sound of recognition and suddenly remembered the man who had wanted to see her. She leaned forward to whisper in Lady’s ear.

“Who is your Master?” asked Lady Hua.

The man politely answered, “Please forgive me, My Lady. Master wishes to keep his name a secret for now. But Master did say that when the time is right, he will come to see you again.” After saying this, he bowed again and carefully gave the guqin to the housekeeper. Then he got back on the horse and left.

The others saw him leave, and gradually followed suit.

The housekeeper saw that they had all left and immediately relaxed. She passed the guqin inside and chuckled, “That was surprising, hehe, My Lady must have been playing really well today to have attracted such a rich man. I thought Lady was playing well today too. It was mystifying!”

The Lady blinked at Pingting and whispered, “So you’re good at the qin huh? I couldn’t tell.”

Pingting bent over and studied the guqin. The qin’s body was made of old Paulownia wood and just by tapping it with mere finger left a sonorous sound.

Pingting suddenly paled. “Phoenix Paulownia-Guqin?”

Phoenix Paulownia-Guqin was extremely rare. It was something that even her Master’s money couldn’t buy. The previous owner of this item must be someone special, to give away such a precious item as a gift.

“A good qin for a beauty huh. I unwittingly picked up a talented girl. Interesting, very interesting.” Lady Hua declared, looking really happy and she nudged Pingting, “That person said that he will come to see you, I’m sure he’s interested in you.” Gui Le and Dong Lin were rich cities and women had no difficulty in talking about love.

“Interested in me?” Pingting fingered the qin.

Her heart thumped and she wasn’t sure what to do.

That person was indeed very sly, his actions were not too fast and not too slow. First quietly listening to the qin, then asking to meet, yet leaving without saying a word and then giving her an expensive qin. Everything was clearly calculated with different motives, just like the art of war.

Although they hadn’t met yet, it was enough to spark Pingting’s curiosity.

“Hong,” the Lady nudged her and giggled, “look at you and your dazed look.”

Pingting laughed sheepishly in response, but her eyes never leaving the guqin.

“Dong Lin isn’t a playground, I have to stay alert.”

Chapter 03

Ever since the visit to the shrine with Pingting, Lady Hua became very attached to Pingting and had an everlasting supply of subjects to talk about with her. She was closer to Pingting even more than the other girls who had been with her for the last few years. Coincidentally, Lady Hua’s maid, Miss Dong’er was very sick and had to go back home so her parents could look after her. Lady Hua then requested Pingting to become her personal attendant.

Just like that, Pingting rose from a manual-work maid to a wedding seamstress to the Lady’s Maid. She had skipped several stages, which surprised everyone.

September was just out of summer, but the autumn tiger was quite fierce.

The laughter of two girls was often heard behind the trees of the Lady's main room.

"Like this?"

"Nope."

"Then... is it like this?"

"Nope."

Lady Hua had tried to sew for the whole day, but she still didn't get it. She threw away her sewing and sighed dramatically. "I refuse to learn, it's no fun and my fingers are full of wounds."

Pingting laughed, "I already warned My Lady that sewing wasn't fun. When I first learned it, all ten of my fingers were swollen. My Lady's wounds are very small anyway." Pingting's plan dictated that she was supposed to escape earlier, but since she hadn't had any news of her Master, she decided to extend her stay.

That guqin was really good. Though Pingting liked it, she'd have to ask to use it, as it was displayed in Lady Hua's room. After all, that qin was namely given to the Lady of Hua Residence.

"I wanted to sew something myself for him..." Lady Hua meant her secret lover.

"My Lady," Mrs Hua seemed to be looking for her. Her face broke into a smile when she saw them and hurriedly smiled, "Oh, so My Lady was here, I had a difficult time finding you. Someone wants to see you."

"Who wants to see me?"

"A handsome young man and the person who delivered you the qin is also there. He claims his name is Dong Dingnan."

Pingting's expression darkened. "*He really came.*"

"Bring him inside," Lady Hua told the housekeeper before turning around and grabbed Pingting's hands. Her eyes were bright when she said, "See? I guessed right, didn't I? He really did want to see you."

Pingting laughed, "He's looking for My Lady, not me."

Lady Hua answered back, "Geez, why are we still idling around? Come with me."

She pulled Pingting into a guest house and sat down behind a blind. Soon the housekeeper led the guests inside

"My Lady, Mr Dong is here."

"Okay. Mrs Hua, you may leave."

Lady Hua and Pingting peeped at the man.

The housekeeper had left. There was only a young man left in the room. His clothes were expensive yet not flashy, the fabric being silk. His eyebrows were black and a graceful royal air surrounded him thus making him an extremely handsome young man.

Lady Hua stared and then whispered into Pingting's ear. "Your qin skills must be really good, to have attracted such a good looking guy."

Pingting was just as shocked as Lady Hua, though her thoughts were different.

She had been in Jing-An Ducal Residence for many years so she knew immediately that he was not just an average rich man.

Could he be an official of Dong Lin?

No, could he even be a member of the royal family?

It wasn't entirely impossible to meet them, as this was Dong Lin's capital. His manners and the formal way he gave the qin was even more suspicious.

"I, Dong Dingnan, have selfishly come to see you, Lady." Dong Dingnan entered the room. When he saw the blinds, he knew immediately that she was quietly observing. He was extremely confident and laughed a little.

His family name wasn't actually 'Dong' and his name certainly wasn't 'Dingnan'. He was the current ruler of Dong Lin's very own brother, the Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie. He was often out on the battlefield and used to figuring out enemy plans. He had just been strolling around an outside of a shrine, feeling very bored when he heard a mystical qin music that soothed his heart.

Who would miss the opportunity to meet a beauty?

As the brother of the King of Dong Lin and as the most important duke, Duke of Zhen-Bei, he had planned everything meticulously. First wait and listen, ask to see at a later time, give a qin and research the Hua family before going to their Residence.

Lady Hua saw how Pingting stared at the man without a word and assumed that she is fond of the good looking gentleman behind the blinds separating them. Not quite knowing what to say, she rolled her eyes, "Since you already know how inconvenient this is, why you still came to see My Lady? My Lady doesn't usually see outsiders."

Pingting raised an eyebrow, but Lady Hua was clearly pleased with herself.

"The sound of qin was memorable and I have come here to ask for another piece," Chu Beijie replied breezily, giving a radiant smile.

Pingting began to analyse Dong Dingnan, but she could not recall a "Dong" family in Dong Lin. *This man is*

using a fake name, which is extremely suspicious. If he finds out who I am, I might get into a lot of trouble. Seeing that Lady Hua was about to speak, she cut in, “Are you really here for a piece?”

“Yes.”

“So you gave me the expensive Phoenix Paulownia-Guqin just to hear me play it?”

“That’s right.”

Pingting put the qin in front of her and plucked a string.

A soft qin melody drifted from within the blinds; it was like a small stream running through a mountain of fresh spring grass. Spellbinding.

Even people outside were listening, breathing in perfect unison.

The melody started strong and powerful, gradually fading to a slow, gentle and sweet section, finally finishing with a high-pitched trill.

After playing one piece, Pingting said, “This qin’s sound indeed seems to fly in the wind, disappearing yet ever present. I’m guessing that Mister would like another piece?”

The so called Dong Dingnan smiled, “My Lady is very understanding, yes, I would like to hear another piece.”

“I have already returned your favour with the piece I just played.” Pingting’s voice was suddenly cold, “Playing the qin is fine with me but playing for someone who is using a fake name does not make me feel comfortable.”

Chu Beijie seemed to be a little stunned. “When did My Lady realise I was using a fake name?”

“Mister does not need to know when.” Pingting knew that her suspicions were right and a sly smile crossed her face. “Mister only needs to tell me whether I guessed right or not.”

Chu Beijie’s eyes brightened and stared intently into the blinds. He had heard that the Lady of Hua Residence was a beauty with one-of-a-kind qin skills. It seemed that her skills lived up to her name, and it would be universally hard to find someone with similar skills. “My Lady is right. Dong Dingnan is one of my pseudonyms, though I didn’t imagine My Lady to see through that.”

“Why does Mister use a fake name?”

Chu Beijie thought that the girl in the blinds was very clever. Their conversation resembled the excitement of overthrowing an enemy, yet it was all hidden. Instead, he laughed and asked back, “Then why is Lady hiding behind the blinds?”

“Is my face that important?”

“Then are names that important?”

“How can Mister compare those two? You wanted a piece from me so I did you a favour. Of course you should use your real name.”

Chu Beijie sat by the table, sipping his cool tea, “Does My Lady not want anything?”

“Eh?” Pingting raised an eyebrow, “What do I want?”

“What My Lady wants is naturally music critic.” He simply laughed, his voice deep.

Pingting briefly thought that he was very difficult to guess, but had to admit that had a confident charm, which was enough to justify his arrogance.

Heart thumping loudly, she couldn’t help walking towards the curtain and secretly look closer.

Chu Beijie sat there proudly with a smug face that said ‘I know you’re secretly looking at me.’ Pingting noticed the decorative stitches of his clothes, finally letting her eyes fall on his jade pendant that hung from his waist.

Her slim figure was startled and she stiffened.

The jade pendant was shiny and smooth, obviously a top-quality product. What surprised her though was the Dong Lin royal family emblem.

He was someone of the Dong Lin royal family.

Pingting’s eyes suddenly lit up. She had not heard any news about the Duke of Jing-An ever since coming to Dong Lin for several months. She believed that this was a good opportunity. Why not ask this ‘Dong Dingnan’?

With that thought in mind, Pingting’s dark black eyes were now full of cunningness.

“I see that Mister is a music critic, do you have an opinion after one piece?”

“My opinion?” Chu Beijie stared into the blinds, the corners of his mouth suddenly lifting into a smile. Bemused, he replied. “The piece was like a mystical swan flying through the clouds and like a strong eagle conquering the fields. This shows that My Lady is curious towards all aspects of life and does not care for riches. My Lady is like a man in more ways than one.”

Pingting fell silent.

Chu Beijie was cleverer than she thought. He was able to tell her personality from one piece. Although she was fully aware of the potential danger he posed, she couldn’t help but give him a look of admiration.

Pingting replied, “Mister is indeed right, but unlike a man I cannot do anything. For example, the world outside must be big and beautiful but I have not seen this myself.”

This was on behalf of all women in the world, who were bound to their families and status. Even Lady Hua,

who was still listening to their conversation, was nodding her head.

Pingting took a deep breath, “I heard that... apart from Dong Lin, there is a beautiful country called Gui Le. Don’t they all love to sing?”

“That’s right. Gui Le has many mountainous scenery, the people there like to dance and sing, but the most valuable thing in Gui Le is their copper. Gui Le makes more copper in one year than Dong Lin in three years.” Chu Beijie brightened at the mention of Gui Le because that was one of his few interests. He had spent almost every day pondering over the map of Gui Le and without thinking, he had chattered away about it.

“No wonder they say that Gui Le is rich. Must be their bronze.”

“Indeed, they are quite a rich country, but this has made them too relaxed. They are a weak country at the moment because the King and the nobility are always fighting internally.”

Chu Beijie summed up Gui Le’s problem in a couple of sentences.

Pingting sighed.

The House of Jing-An was at the core of Gui Le and since Pingting had grown up in their Residence, she knew more details about the court than the average peasant.

If the King hadn’t been jealous of the centuries-old House of Jing-An, then the Residence would’ve never been burnt overnight, right?

When Pingting heard Gui Le’s biggest problem from the ‘enemy’ in such a nonchalant tone, she couldn’t help asking, “So does Gui Le not have any form of monarchy or governors?”

“Well yes, Gui Le does have a duke, Duke of Jing-An. He has looked after the armies and governed the country for many years.” His smiled gently, revealing pleasure, “But because the House of Jing-An’s army was too big and successful, the new King decided to wipe it out.”

“What!” A rustling sound was heard from behind the blinds, “Didn’t you say the people of House of Jing-An were good? Then Gui Le’s King must be really weird.”

Chu Beijie sat up straighter, his expression much more determined. He laughed, “The House of Jing-An may be loyal to Gui Le, but he hates my Dong Lin. Now that they’re gone and Gui Le is without a strong leader, Dong Lin can easily conquer Gui Le.”

Pingting painfully registered the news, but feigned happiness, “I see, then our Dong Lin is even stronger. So... did no one from the Jing-An Ducal Residence survived?”

“There are some very cunning people in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, especially the young master, He Xia. I heard they weren’t there at the time of the fire. It is believed that they have escaped Gui Le. He Su is still trying to capture them, despite being on the ‘same side’. A real pity.” What he really meant by the last two sentences was ‘it was a real pity that He Su didn’t finish off the House of Jing-An’.

She had finally learned that her Master had not been captured yet and she felt slightly relieved at this.

Her Master and the others were probably safe, right? Even if she tried, she didn't know where to begin looking for them. Why not stay here for a little longer, accompanying Lady Hua, and use him to find out the latest news?

Thinking that much, she plucked another string.

On the other side, Chu Beijie heard that note and the melody that followed. It was harmoniously broad, yet as smooth as trickling water. It was very much inspiring like the first except it was slightly more feminine.

Before one could sigh in pleasure, a somewhat deep voice began to accompany the qin sound.

“When there is trouble, there are heroes... When there are heroes, there are beautiful women... surviving the turmoil, surviving the turmoil...”

The mellow voice resonated, like an angel.

Chu Beijie was temporarily caught off guard by her voice and the theme of this song. His heart lifted at the sound of her music. Although he was only twenty years old, he had learned the art of war since he was little and excelled in all his studies. He grew up in the royal Residence, meaning that he'd seen many beautiful women in his lifetime and over time, admiration became disgust and contempt for them.

He vowed to find a real, real beauty.

The person behind the blinds, he knew, was definitely the best qin player he had ever heard. It was impossible to criticise. Though he had not seen her personally, he knew that she was beautiful from a portrait he had asked for during his initial investigation.

Looking at the figure's shape inside the blinds, he knew that it had to be her.

Each word filled the audience's heart and mind like jade beads clattering on a plate, while sometimes as quiet as a cup soundlessly being placed onto the table.

Pingting ended the piece by singing ‘surviving the turmoil’ several times and held the note there, letting it slowly die away.

Chu Beijie had closed his eyes to appreciate the music and he took a while to come back to his senses. “This ‘Surviving the Turmoil’ song is inspired by the pain and suffering of the ‘beauty’. However, for you, there's a completely different feeling. It's more victorious, less suffering and pain.”

“Thank you Mister.” Pingting replied in a slightly deep voice and her face was flushed. Playing qin and singing was tiring work for her, but she still wanted to know more and had to keep his interest by appeasing his ear, “I've heard of He Xia from the House of Jing-An too. Don't they all say he's the best commander in Gui Le?”

“That is correct.”

“Then...is our Duke of Dong Lin stronger than him?”

Chu Beijie smiled at the mention of himself, “What does My Lady think?”

“I’ve been inside for too long, how should I know? I have heard, from the newest servants, that He Xia fought Chu Beijie a while ago, at the borders of Gui Le.”

“Yeah.”

“Who won the battle?” Pingting knew that the victor had to be her Master, but she thought the victory had been too easy. Sure, she did lead them into a trap, but the troops of the Duke of Zhen-Bei were large enough to put up a good fight. However, they admitted defeat and retreated a bit too quickly.

When the Duke of Zhen-Bei returned to Dong Lin, was he punished for his defeat? If the King of Dong Lin ripped Chu Beijie of his authority, then he would’ve helped Gui Le immensely.

“He Xia won.” Chu Beijie replied without any emotion.

“In other words, the Duke of Zhen-Bei lost?”

“No, the Duke of Zhen-Bei won too.”

“Oh?”

Chu Beijie gave a dark, ambiguous smile, “He Xia small victory, Chu Beijie big victory.”

Most people wouldn’t understand, but this shocked Pingting deeply.

She knew this battle too well, Dong Lin had been invading the border for the last two years. At first, the King persisted in refusing to dispatch her Master there. It was only until the army there was about to admit defeat, when he’d hurriedly issued the transfer order, announcing that her Master must protect the border town at all costs.

The lack of medical supplies and food storage, in addition to the vigorous size of enemy army, had strongly threatened the military of her country.

But why did we win? She had thought of many scenarios to answer this question several times before, but Dong Dingnan had just confirmed her biggest fear.

“Why is My Lady so quiet?” His voice was deep.

Pingting pondered for a little longer, then sighed, “Humans can’t stop fighting, how annoying.”

Chu Beijie heard the annoyance in her voice, not quite understanding it, “My Lady, why bother with political affairs? Let’s talk about something more light-hearted.”

“True. Talking about nature would be a nicer topic.”

Pingting didn't want to arouse his suspicions so she changed to literature and art. She was still worried that she might have accidentally given away her identity. She kept her answers short and always spoke curiously.

This was a good chance for Chu Beijie to show off, though he did try to keep a low profile, as he had travelled immensely in number before. But royal blood still ran his veins, so he veered off course. He began to talk about the shape of the place, then how to counterattack when attacked. He then explained when to openly attack, and when to plan assassinations. Even his comments about systems of government were well explained.

Hearing the silence inside the blinds, he tried to smile. "My discussions aren't interesting enough. I swapped back to war again."

Pingting, inside the blinds, was thinking that this man had to be at least a warrior of the Dong Lin army. Suddenly, she had another thought, *could this guy be the Duke of Zhen-Bei himself?*

No way...how can there be such a coincidence? She shook her head several times to forget the thought. She whispered, "Thank you Mister. As you know, I am female, so I do not understand these things."

The two people unwittingly talked the whole afternoon away.

Just before sunset, two knocks were heard outside the door, and the young man who had passed on the qin came in and whispered in Chu Beijie's ear.

Pingting saw this and felt that they were talking about the war, possibly even about her Master himself. She tried to hear what they were saying, but she was too far away.

Chu Beijie sat up straighter, "Talking with My Lady and hearing My Lady play the qin was very pleasant. I won't bother My Lady anymore, Dingnan gives you his thanks. Dingnan will come again in two days."

He got up too fast, too sudden. Pingting was even more suspicious that it was something to do with her master. She turned hostile, "Perhaps another girl has arrived outside your home."

Dong Dingnan couldn't help thinking that she was suddenly very rude and was about to retort back when Pingting suddenly laughed. "I know, I know. Women don't interest Mr Dong; war is what Mister likes. Of course I shouldn't hold Mister back."

Her warm laughter rippled out and his fingers twitched. Humour flashed in his eyes. "The Marquess of Jing-An, Gui Le, whom My Lady had mentioned today; maybe My Lady will see him in a couple of days."

This struck her like lightning. Pingting almost dropped her tea cup. Could it be that her Master had been found, captured and held in the Dong Lin capital?

She was about to ask again, but Chu Beijie had already stood up. "My apologies, but I must leave immediately, goodbye."

Pingting made a strangled sound, "Please Mister, don't leave yet."

Chu Beijie really seemed to be in a rush. He simply waved before rapidly walking away into the night.

Chapter 04

“Ah, the show’s finished” After Chu Beijie left, Lady Hua finally sneezed, jumped up and removed the blinds with a face of utter boredom. “He is such a battle freak. Only his appearance looks good. He didn’t even say anything fun. I wonder how you could even talk with him for such a long time. Hey Hong, why are you silent?”

Pingting was still feeling anxious and deeply thinking about what the leaving Chu Beijie had said.

Is there any news about Master?

Are all the people of the Jing-An Ducal Residence safe?

What is ‘Dong Dingnan’ doing right now?

He had a lasting impression and a smile as he discussed politics. He knew all the details about the war, just as well as Pingting, meant that he must be an important military commander.

Military commander? She began thinking through all of the important commanders of Dong Lin. The Duke of Zhen-Bei was the first name to come to her mind. She blinked, regretting she had not asked for a portrait of Chu Beijie earlier.

But wasn’t it be far too complex a coincidence for the Duke of Zhen-Bei to give her — a maid serving the House of Jing-An — a qin and requesting to see her?

Lady Hua saw that she was in a daze and laughed hard, “He’s already gone and look at your dazed expression. Already missing him?” She playfully waved her hand in front of Pingting’s face.

Feeling her touch, Pingting returned to her senses and told Lady Hua,” Sorry, I’m really tired. I want to retire to my room.”

“You haven’t eaten dinner yet.”

“I’ll eat more, tomorrow morning.”

When Pingting returned to her room, she laid on the hard but clean bed and began to think again.

“Master...” She gritted her teeth. Her heart felt like a fire blazing gently in her chest. She began to get anxious. “Don’t be so anxious, Pingting, being anxious will ruin everything.” She quietly told herself.

Slowly, her messed thoughts got pulled back into order. She calmly took two deep breaths and closed her eyes. She pictured the Duke of Jing-An’s flag; she remembered her Master, the Jing-An Ducal Residence, that last victory and the road home...

The Marquess of Jing-An had just won a battle, the army slowly marched. The radiant Duke of Jing-An’s flag was fluttering high in the wind.

The commander in front was riding a huge magnificent horse. He wore a purple uniform adorned with a dragon emblem. Strips of metal gleamed on his shoulder. Gems, gold and jade hung from his waist luxuriously. He was the legendary He Xia.

That day, although He Xia had been victorious in war, he did not smile and was frowning very deeply.

“Master!” A girl’s voice came from the crowd and the sound of hooves from behind.

Even though He Xia did not turn his head, he knew who it was. “Pingting, didn’t I tell you to travel by carriage as you didn’t feel very well in the last few days? Why are you riding a horse again?”

Pingting caught up to He Xia, and breathlessly said, “Who said I needed such care? I only coughed a few times but that damn Dongzhuo was so scared and immediately told Master. I was afraid that Master thought I got sick too often and wouldn’t let me come next time.”

“It’s not like you’ll listen to me, even if I tell you to stay home, right? I’m just feeling sorry for you, a girl who’s defenceless against a sword. Even if you get sick, there’s no husband to look after you.”

Pingting managed a small smile and twirled her wind-swept hair. “I’m not pitiful. Which maid has such a good life and is able to go with her Master to war?” She laughed twice but suddenly frowned, coughing.

He Xia turned his head, “What’s wrong? If you haven’t recovered, don’t push yourself. The sun is very strong yet you still want to come riding with me. If you don’t listen, I really won’t let you come alongside the army next time.”

Pingting quickly covered her mouth to hide her coughing. Glancing up, she saw that He Xia’s face look concerned so she smiled gently. “Don’t worry Master; I’m healthier than any horse. Her beady eyes studied He Xia for a moment, before lowering them, quietly saying, “I’m just afraid that... sigh, that when Master feels anxious, there won’t be anyone beside you to cheer you up.”

She sighed deeply and He Xia’s heart melted. He gave a twisted smile while shaking his head, “You are such a strange maid. I can’t hide anything from you.” Seeing that Pingting hadn’t her usual rosy cheeks, he smiled. “Come here then. Let me ride behind you on the same horse so you won’t worry about it too much. Let’s share our thoughts.”

“Ok.” Pingting nodded and slid off her horse.

He Xia reached out his hand and pulled Pingting onto his horse. He put one hand on her waist for support and the other one on the reins. He slowly gathered his thoughts and carefully chose his words, “Our opposition was the Dong Lin army. This war with Chu Beijie has lasted two months, on the surface we won but underneath we lost.”

Pingting nodded, “Master is right. Though Dong Lin may have retreated, Gui Le had huge casualties. If Dong Lin attacked again, there’s no way the Gui Le army would be able to hold up against them. If only the King was on Master’s side and didn’t stubbornly refuse to let Master take charge for two whole years, then the situation wouldn’t’ve been so bad.”

“Pingting, don’t carelessly criticise the King.” He Xia thought for a moment, “Just remember that the new

King is not the Prince Su before he took the throne.”

Pingting bit her lip and thought hard. After Prince Su took the throne, he had indeed changed a lot. She swallowed her worry and tried to say comfortingly, “I understand why Master feels so upset but the number of casualties of our army is not Master’s fault. It has been a difficult two years. The King finally letting Master taking charge must’ve been because he wanted to embarrass you.”

“That’s exactly why I’m anxious. If we don’t win this battle and return to the capital, a lot of people will protest and even Father will be affected. The House of Jing-An holds far too much influence and power. Even if I were the King, I’d try to get rid of them as well.”

Remembering the new king’s cold behaviour after taking the throne was extremely unpleasant. The two immediately felt a chilling sensation running down their spines.

Seeing his own little maid frowning over the royal heritage problems, He Xia smiled. He reached out and using his thumb, gently smoothed out the wrinkles on her forehead. “Stop thinking about it. Let’s say some happy things. It’s thanks to you to think of the extremely clever plan of changing the course of the river to threaten flooding enemy troops when we led them to the mountains. Chu Beijie totally lost to that and had to retreat. Now everyone in the army knows that we have a female advisor. When we get back to the capital, I’ll make sure Father gives you a huge reward. Say, what would you like?”

“More rewards? The Duke has already given me enough rewards to last me more than ten lifetimes.” Pingting looked at the sky; the sun was slightly to one side, beside the high-raised Duke of Jing-An’s flag. She carefully looked back at He Xia then turned away again. In a quiet voice she murmured, “Master, there’s something I don’t know whether I should say or not.”

“What can’t you say to me?”

Pingting looked uncomfortable then suddenly cracked a smile. “Actually I won’t say it. If I did, you’d feel annoyed again.”

He Xia seemed to have guessed what Pingting had wanted to say and gave a small smile in return.

Neither of them talked and the horse just plodded.

The horse’s thumped against the sun-baked mud, leaving puffs of dust flying.

Pingting calmly gazed ahead, thinking deeply about something. He Xia knew that his clever little maid was thinking deeply about something, so he let the horse slow down even more and settled comfortably in the saddle.

After a while Pingting said, “I guess I’ll try and say it anyway”.

“I’m listening.” When He Xia saw that Pingting had a serious look on her face, he immediately began to listen intently.

“Master, if my predictions were right, things will get worse even more. I’m not joking.” Pingting turned her head and stared at He Xia in the eyes. In a nervous voice she said, “It’s likely that Chu Beijie knows how

weak our army is and can no longer fight well. If he comes again within two months, Gui Le's army will definitely perish. I'm sure he deliberately retreated when we were at our most vulnerable point so that...Master could go back to the Capital."

"You're right but why did he do that?"

Pingting's energetic black pupils rolled twice, it seemed that she already had the answer but she sighed, "If Master lost the battle, the King could, hypothetically, take advantage to cut away the House of Jing-An's enormous military power. Say, Master, he probably won't do that after just one defeat, right?"

He Xia shook his head, "Of course not. The House of Jing-An has been an important part of Gui Le in the past. If the King really decides to kill me, unnecessary blood will be shed and it will cause a riot."

"Then if Master wins and goes back, will the King reward Master?"

"If we win, of course the King has to reward us." He Xia then put in, "Though it's not like I want the rewards, but the King must reward and punish freely, to earn everyone's respect."

"If Master wins and returns to the Capital, the peasants will love Master even more. I believe the King will give Master rewards but deep down, he'll resent the House of Jing-An even more. The House of Jing-An will be in danger then."

"In other words, the King will feel threatened and try to get rid of the House of Jing-An. As soon as the Duke of Jing-An falls, Gui Le will be unstable and Dong Lin will take this as an opportunity to attack. Haha, Chu Beijie sure is crazy. What he wants isn't just a few cities, but the entire land our Gui Le occupies."

"You said that right!" Pingting clapped her hands, pleasure lit up in her eyes. She immediately changed from the serious army advisor to an energetic, cute maid. On her round face, two dimples appeared. Glancing back at He Xia, she smiled, "Master is so clever. Whatever Chu Beijie is plotting, Master will find the answer easily."

He Xia couldn't help laughing, "The cleverest person I know is our army advisor, Bai. If you were a boy, I wouldn't be the main advisor anymore would I?"

Both people laughed. Though this cheerful sound did not stop, in their hearts, both of them felt uneasy.

The mud path ahead seemed very difficult to travel on.

Though their hearts were prepared, not even in their wildest dreams did they guess that in a blink of an eye, everything would change. Forever.

After a journey of five days, they finally arrived at the capital. Gui Le's King, He Su himself, came to welcome them. The peasants of the city knew that the famous Marquess of Jing-An had won and returned. They rushed to greet him and they scrambled behind the two lines of somewhat serious-looking soldiers. Everyone had their necks craned forward, trying to get a better view of the stage.

"Which one is the Marquess of Jing-An?"

“Yer stupid. Have ya never seen the Marquess of Jing-An before?” Someone pointed, “That’s him, the ‘un in front of the army. Geez, who in the capital can’t recognise the Marquess of Jing-An?”

“Haha, this is my first time in the Capital. I came to visit my relatives. I never imagined I’d be able to see the Marquess of Jing-An with my very own eyes! When I get back home, I’ll have a lot of stories to tell!”

While the crowd continued to chatter, the army had already stopped at the city gates.

He Xia got off his horse. In a loud voice he shouted, “Hail the King. I, He Xia, has won the battle and Dong Lin has officially retreated.”

He Su was completely covered in yellow-gold cloth. On his head he wore a headdress adorned with gems. More gems glittered from his clothes. He smiled slightly and personally helped He Xia up. “My Beloved Official, you may get up. Thank you for solving another one of my many problems. Gui Le is very proud of having the House of Jing-An and thanks to them we have nothing to fear about our enemies.”

He picked up He Xia’s hand fondly and they turned around.

“Look! It’s him!”

“The Marquess of Jing-An!”

A ripple of excitement from the crowd of peasants.

He Su smiled at He Xia, “I cannot thank you, My Beloved Official, enough.” He walked up the well-prepared stage and held up a cup of the best wine in Gui Le. He slowly announced, “To all those who have gathered here, please listen. Dong Lin has long been an enemy of Gui Le. After today’s victory, we no longer have to live in fear and I shall repay our hero who has made this so.”

Everyone nodded eagerly, wondering exactly how the ruler was planning to reward He Xia.

He Xia knelt down, “The victory was thanks to King, who directed everything. All He Xia, did was make the army follow King’s plans. I do not deserve any reward.”

“No no, you are Gui Le’s best official. How could I not reward you?” He Su had another thought, “I will give you three rewards. First, I’ll award you a cup of the best wine in Gui Le.”

Behind He Xia, someone gave him a cup of the good wine. He Xia took it and raised his head to look at the King. He Su nodded, “You may drink.”

He Su made sure he had finished the cup before saying, “Secondly, I’ll give you a precious sword. Someone, please bring it up.”

He Xia was presented with a long red box.

He Xia started to get a headache. He was getting even less sure of He Su’s real intentions. He could only reply, “Thank you, King.” He pushed open this lid and his eyes widened. “Ahh...”

An extremely precious sword laid inside the box. There was no sign of rust and the hilt was a jet black colour. It was a long lost sword, known as the “Precious Heimo Sword”. It was known that the blade was extremely destructive – one small cut would leave a nasty scar for a lifetime.

He Xia had lived in wealth for all of his life and so he took no interest in jewellery and the like, but he loved good weapons. Seeing the precious sword made him shout in surprise.

He Su laughed from the raised platform, “How is it? You like it?”

“This sword is too precious. How could King...”

“That’s why I have to give it to you. Everyone knows you like soldiers and weapons. Just take it.”

He Xia didn’t know whether to be shocked or happy. “Thank you, my King.” He turned back around and received the box.

Pingting had come up from behind and took the box from her Master. She was about to leave when He Su noticed her, “My, aren’t you Pingting?” He walked down the platform, breaking into a smile, “Why are you here with He Xia again?”

Pingting bowed, “I am here, my King.”

“No need. Back when you were still learning with He Xia, you memorised everything faster than us, and was acknowledged as a female genius. Back then, we visited the Royal Residence a lot too, and there were many beautiful women but not as clever as you! He Xia, you’re luckier than me.” He Su turned his head and laughed, “Anyway, the third is rather normal, jewellery and gold. I know you don’t like those kinds of things so I’ll just get someone to send them to Jing-An Ducal Residence.”

“Thank you, King!”

“We grew up together, we’re like brothers, so why the politeness?” He Su looked at He Xia fondly and looked at Pingting, who was planning to leave. “Pingting.”

Pingting felt rather tired and she was planning to quietly go back to rest in the carriage. Unfortunately, she heard He Su call for her and so she had to answer, “How may I help you, my King?”

She certainly wasn’t pretty, but her voice was charming like every word was bouncing off her tongue.

He Su quietly stared at her bowed head, thoughts elsewhere.

“My King?”

“Eh?” He Su came back to his senses and he paused before saying, “You may leave.”

Pingting quickly left, handing the box to another person, commanding, “Be careful with it, Master really likes this heavy black thingy.” Her learning ability was better than most and though she did know that this was the Precious Heimo Sword, she disliked weapons herself. She always called He Xia’s ‘darlings’ as ‘thingy’s’.

Master had returned victorious and the King had given him many rewards. Everyone in the Residence would eventually get their share.

The soldiers filled up exactly twelve tables and the Duke of Jing-An, He Mo, sat at the main table, grinning as he heard the compliments from the crowd.

He Xia was drinking a lot of wine too, probably three big bottles in total. Pingting could be counted as one of the important main people of her Residence, but she wasn't present that evening.

Her room was far away from the bustling activity, very quiet. Pingting sat inside, she had lit up a lamp, making a dark silhouette outside.

"Pingting?" He Xia suddenly burst into the room.

Pingting put down her needle, raising her eyes and laughed. "Why is Master here when there are still so many guests?"

"To see you." He Xia took her half-finished Mandarin duck, "They say that no one is perfect, but honestly, I must disagree. You can do everything, not only are you good with song and poetry, but you can even scheme in war. Not to mention your intricate needlework is like a work of heaven."

Pingting giggled, "No one compares needlework to heaven, you know? Quit playing with words." She took her sewing back and did a few more stitches, but suddenly sighed.

"Pingting, has Father told you?"

"Yeah."

"I only just learnt that myself, from Dongzhuo." He Xia saw Pingting's frozen smile, so he chose a chair and carefully chose his words. "Geez my father, he didn't even consult me first."

"The Duke told me that even though I'm not a concubine, my current status is much like one. He says that everyone in the Residence should be calling me "Madam" apart from Master's future official wife, the Marquess."

He Xia saw how Pingting was slowly opening up and his heart began to hurt. "Pingting, do you want to marry me?"

"Do I not suit you?" Pingting whipped her head around, staring intently into He Xia's eyes.

"No way!" He Xia shook his head, suddenly got up and began to pace around the table. "I understand. For the last few years, we studied and played together, even learned how to fight and deal with horses together, but I'm only an older brother to you and you're only a younger sister to me. If you marry me just like that, won't you feel upset?" Seeing Pingting's expressionless face, he tried again, "You're unlike most girls. You have your own opinion. I just don't want you to be upset."

After some silence, Pingting quietly whispered, "If the Duke wants me to, so what can I do? Master should

know that the Duke found Pingting on the roads and looked after her like his own daughter. Pingting is extremely grateful to the Duke so if he wants her life, she will give it.”

“Back then, who said that they wanted to find the best possible husband or else they would rather never marry and die a long death?” *She’s usually very clever, so why is she so sappy today?* He Xia was already annoyed with Pingting’s moans and sighs and the table seemed cracked from his thumping.

The two people were still discussion when Dongzhuo ran in. “Master, please go to the front courtyard. The King has given His Order. Oh yeah and apparently Pingting has to come too.”

He Xia asked, “What does Pingting have to do with this Order?”

“Don’t ask, you’ll know when you get there.”

The three people hurried to the front courtyard.

The front courtyard was no longer bustling with activity like before. It was very late into the night, and about seventy or eighty percent of the guests had already left. The remaining ones were extremely drunk and some of them were even snoring, drool falling onto the table.

A man, who was wearing royal service clothes stood there. When he saw them he said, “The King has given His Order: Please may the son of the Duke of Jing-An and Pingting meet him in the Royal Residence.” After reading the order, his face broke into a smile, “Please may the son of the Duke of Jing-An also bring the Precious Heimo Sword. The King said so.”

He Xia wondered aloud, “Why, it’s so late, does King want to see us?”

“I guess I know.” The messenger chuckled and said, “The Queen was talking to the King about how noisy the Jing-An Ducal Residence would be this evening. I don’t know what exactly the Queen said, but the King started talking about how he used to see Sir practising swordsmanship, like a lion, while he studied. Miss Pingting, whose intelligence is so impossibly rare, would also be there, serving at one side.”

“Ah, the King sure likes praising us today.”

“Yes, yes, yes, so you see, the King’s praises, made the Queen feel curious to see Sir sword dance, accompanied by Miss Pingting’s qin. As Sir knows, the King is very devoted to the Queen, so he sent an Order, to take you two to their Residence.” The messenger added, “The King also said that although it’s very late, the moon is very large and round, perfect for moon gazing, which will be followed by sunrise later.”

He Xia nodded, “I see.” He turned back to Pingting, “Since the Queen wants to hear you play qin, bring our best qin.”

Pingting went inside and not long later, she hurried back with her qin. She had also put on a chiffon cloth over a part of her face.

He Xia took five other servants, including Pingting and Dongzhuo. No one took the carriage, they were each on their own horse. All of the shops had long closed for the day. No lights were on, everyone was well

asleep. The only sound that night was the steady beat of hooves, thundering on the stone pavement.

Seeing the messenger and his companions leading the way slowly, not far ahead, Pingting leaned towards her master. In a quiet voice, she whispered, "Master, the King is going to make his move."

"Yeah, I don't have a good feeling either." He Xia looked at the messenger's back view, "Except for the messenger himself, all of his companions are top assassins."

"King wants Master to bring the Precious Heimo Sword but it isn't stated clearly on the Order. He sent a messenger instead...this must be a trap." The horses' steps were slow and hesitant, as if sensing danger. Pingting reached out to pat the horse reassuringly, while saying, "I'm worried that the King plotted to make Master bring in the Precious Heimo Sword into the Royal Residence and then create chaos, so that His Majesty can frame Master for betrayal when royal military comes to back up."

He Xia looked around, "His soldiers are standing beside the footpath as well. If we attempt to escape, they'll definitely attack."

Dongzhuo was beside them, listening to every word. He gripped the edge of his seat, lowered his voice and muttered, "Yup, there's a murderous aura here." He had also been with He Xia for a while, so he could sense when danger was approaching.

The other servants were alert, keeping a close eye on their surroundings.

They were still only halfway there, but they knew that if He Su really was planning to frame them, entering the Royal Residence meant certain death.

"What should we do?" asked He Xia.

Pingting nodded slightly, "Well, I told the Duke about my suspicions as I went to get my qin. Although there are lots of people living in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, they should all be able to escape the capital city under the cover of dark. As for us..." She opened her palm, revealing five ink-black marbles.

Whatever that meant, He Xia himself knew.

"Okay!" Still speaking quietly, He Xia and Pingting nodded at each other.

"The Mister in front of us...please stop for a while." Pingting's high-pitched voice rang out.

The messenger and his companions turned forward and Pingting calculated the right time to throw the things in her hand. Sparks of fire shot out with a boom, instantly cutting off He Xia's group and the messenger's.

Clang! The Precious Heimo Sword was unsheathed.

"The King wants to hurt an official! Fight our way out!" Dongzhuo yelled.

As expected, more soldiers appeared on the two sides of the road.

The sky was filled with cries of battle.

“KILL!”

“GO! DON’T LET ANY OF THEM GET AWAY!”

“The King has given his Order: CAPTURE HE XIA AND THAT GIRL ALIVE!!”

Pingting raised her head and noted that there weren’t many soldiers on the enemy side. She secretly sighed in relief.

That’s how it should be. The House of Jing-An has been the managing the military for the last few decades, so using soldiers to assassinate them wouldn’t work. *But isn’t He Su worried that we might counterattack and attack his Royal Residence instead?*

“KILL!”

The men He Xia had brought were all excellent warriors who’d survived hundreds of battles, except for Pingting herself. It wasn’t long before they managed to break out of the enemy’s encirclement.

“The House of Jing-An has rebelled!”

“The King plotted against His Majesty’s loyal official! The King plotted against His Majesty’s loyal official!”

“The House of Jing-An rebelled!”

“The House of Jing-An must be destroyed!”

The cries of murder echoed the sky, blood splattered on the fighters’ faces yet both sides were still screaming for war.

Pingting couldn’t fight and usually hid behind He Xia. At the most she could only throw two or three light bombs. However, she did know that the bigger the chaos, the more likely the people of Jing-An Ducal Residence could escape.

She’d already run out of bombs by the time He Xia’s group were safely outside the city gates. Everyone was covered in blood and Dongzhuo had been cut twice, though his injuries weren’t life-threatening.

Leaving the city gates behind, it was like the battle had ended. Only the coarse breathing of the war horses could be heard in the cold night.

Pingting looked into the distance and then she pointed at a pillar of flames. “Look Master, the Royal House have begun to move. I hope the Duke is fine. I reckon the King thought he’d be able to capture us, so he didn’t send many people to our Residence.”

He Xia followed her finger, finding himself facing the direction of his home. He couldn’t stop worrying about his father, so he turned his horse around. “Pingting, wait outside. We’ll check on Father and we’ll be

back soon.”

Pingting knew she couldn't fight and wouldn't be of much use anyway. She jumped from the horse and said, “I'll meet you all at that place in the mountains, where we often go.”

He Xia nodded, “Okay.” He led Dongzhuo and the others back inside the city.

Pingting watched these family-like people disappear. *He Su may be the King and an evil one at that, but he only dare uses selected people's loyalty. The army won't take sides at least until tomorrow morning, until the chaos is cleared and understood. With a neutral army, the residents of Jing-An Ducal Residence should be able to escape without too much difficulty.*

What exactly He Su would do the next morning was unimportant as her people would have safely escaped by then.

She checked her thoughts at least three times for any mistakes, before relaxing, and slowly leaving for the mountain cliffs where they promised to meet.

The cliff was two miles away. It would have been quite easy if she was on a horse, but it was a little more difficult on foot by herself.

Pingting walked on for a little longer and far away, she could see the sky changing to a grey-white colour behind the mountain ahead. She took a few more steps when suddenly she heard a rustling noise.....

Chapter 05

Outside the window, a cat meowed and Pingting stirred. She opened her shining, energetic black eyes and faced the window, chuckling softly. “You're an annoying cat, tomorrow I'll definitely find a way to get back at you.” Suddenly she remembered that the House of Jing-An was still in danger, and her dimples disappeared.

“What should I do?” It was still dark and most of the inhabitants are still asleep, when she got up and fumbled for the table. She drank a cup of cold tea and continued to worry.

If I hadn't been caught by human traffickers, I would still be by Master's side and I wouldn't have to worry about him. Dongzhuo is too cheeky and energetic, I hope he doesn't annoy Master too much.

If I leave tomorrow, where should I go to find Master?

Though she was extremely clever, she was still quite young and couldn't help feeling weak without the support of others. Suddenly, Chu Beijie's face popped into her thoughts, his eyes seemingly able to see into one's soul.

“Should I invite that fake Mister Dong here and demand the latest news?” But she knew that deep down, ‘Dong Dingnan’ was highly likely to be Chu Beijie, and therefore being around him makes her feel uneasy inside. “If I mess up...”

She thought of when she first received the Phoenix Paulownia-Guqin – it was the same uneasy feeling. But whenever she thought of ‘Dong Dingnan’ and the way he spoke of his experiences, his proud attitude... her face suddenly began to feel very hot.

The vivid image of him in mind and her memory of receiving the Phoenix Paulownia-Guqin caused her heart to speed up. She thought of her conversations with Dong Dingnan, Dong Dingnan’s experiences, Dong Dingnan’s bold and extravagant actions...and her face for some reason, began to feel very hot.

Pingting kicked herself, stroking her cheeks she said, “Pingting, what are you thinking about? Finding Master is the most important thing at the moment.”

As she tend to her random thoughts or daydreams, the sun is already up.

After washing, she went inside to serve her Lady. When Lady Hua saw her, she clapped her hands, giggling. “You fell asleep before you could even eat dinner, so why are there dark circles under your eyes? I’m sure you were thinking about your lover all night, am I right?”

Pingting turned and looked at the mirror. As expected, there were dark violet smudges under her eyes. She blushed slightly, “What is My Lady joking about? Say that again and I won’t serve My Lady anymore.”

She had always talked to her Master like that back in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, and didn’t think she was being rude. Fortunately Lady Hua had been flattered throughout her life and liked her temper. Trying to hold back her laughter, she said, “Don’t be angry, I totally understand. When I first saw the guy of my dream, I couldn’t sleep for the first couple of nights too.”

Pingting wasn’t originally thinking that, but Lady Hua’s words made her heart thump and she lowered her eyes. “Let me help wash My Lady, the water is getting cold.”

“I don’t need you, clumsy girl, I can wash myself.” She grabbed the dry towel off Pingting, “You were never suited to serve others in the first place.”

“I’m not suited to serve others?” Pingting eyes widened. She had always been serving others, especially her mischievous master and no one had ever said she was doing a bad job. She could play qin and chess equally well, she was talented in both literature and art, while also being known for her entertaining wit and conversations, and she was considered to be extremely gentle. How is she not suited to serve others? Pingting had to protest back, “But in the previous days when I washed you, I only broke a few strands of your hair.”

“Of course, because you have never helped people wash their hair before.”

Lady Hua was right. Back in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, she had her own maid to help wash herself. She had hardly washed her own hair, never mind helping others wash theirs. Once or twice, she had tried to wash her Master’s hair, but He Xia had shrieked in pain after a few seconds and she gave up on that idea.

After Lady Hua had washed, she continued to work on her sewing. Unfortunately, she had jabbed herself several times and was crying in pain after a while.

Pingting tried to hide her boredom. “I said it would take hard work, so why does My Lady still want to learn it? Everyday My Lady gets me to help and then gets hurt... What’s the point in doing this?”

Lady Hua sighed and stared blankly at her sewing. "What can I do? I miss him, so I sew for him, but then I get jabbed and so I hate him because it's his fault I'm doing this. Then I remember he can't see me, he doesn't know what I'm doing. Oh God, I'm so annoyed!"

Pingting wanted to laugh but seeing her Lady being so depressed, she couldn't bring herself to do it. The image of 'Dong Dingnan' once again came back into her thoughts, her vision blurred and her needle began to twist dangerously.

"Ouch!"

Lady Hua clapped, eyes sparkling. "You finally got jabbed. I say this needle is biased, it only likes to jab my thumb."

The two people continued to talk on, though Pingting appeared to be fully engaged in the conversation, she felt anxious. She had secretly hoped that 'Dong Dingnan' would come so she could learn more of her master. Her eyes flicked from East to West and the day was rapidly ending, but no one came to visit them.

Lady Hua saw Pingting's tight lips and she broke into a sweet smile. "Don't worry, he said he will come in three days. If he doesn't, we will just ignore him."

Towards evening, the two girls were sitting inside and eating dinner when the Housekeeper hurried in. "My Lady, someone wants to see you."

Pingting abruptly lifted her head, eager. Lady Hua turned and said, "Let him in."

The blinds came down and Pingting's heart began to beat faster. She stared at the door with anticipation.

Soon, they heard footsteps approaching the door and a huge moving silhouette appeared. He entered the room and bowed respectfully towards the Lady on the other side of the blinds. "Good evening My Lady, my name is Chu Morang, and I am here to pass on a gift."

Oh, so it wasn't 'Dong Dingnan', but the person who had passed the qin to her previously. She thought in disdain. It felt as if someone just coldly splashed a bucket of icy water onto her fiery energy. She was utterly disappointed.

Chu Morang politely laughed, "This is one of GuiLe's many bronze ornaments. It's not that expensive, but the detail is rather impressive."

Pingting looked out through the blinds, and she could tell at one glance that the ornament which Chu Morang has presented was in no way at all lacking. Not only was it expensive but it was carved by the famous Gui Le bronze master, Lu Bing. Lu Bing was a legendary craftsman who died thirty years ago.

The ornament was of a girl playing qin on the mountains, her expression realistic and serene. It was so lovely that many people wouldn't mind having a painting of it. This 'Dong Dingnan' had probably given her this gift to compare its magnificence to her qin skills.

Pingting decided that 'Dong Dingnan' spent money extravagantly and admired his tactics. "Such an expensive gift is hard to accept. Please take it back." Her voice was notably cold.

Chu Morang protested, "Lady Hua, this is the Master's gift, especially for you."

"Last time it was a guqin, this time around it's a bronze ornament, so what will it be tomorrow?" Pingting paused a moment before saying, "If his business meant for a barter of objects, I have nothing to give in return as I am a woman. However, if your Master wants something else, it probably won't be as easy to get it."

Lady Hua was clever and added another sentence from aside, "And he even gets someone else to give a gift on his behalf? How insincere, no wonder My Lady is angry." She was smiling though. "Mrs Hua, send him off."

"My Lady, please listen to Morang, actually..."

But Lady Hua wouldn't have any of it, "Not listening, not listening, not listening! You men only know how to hurt girls' hearts." Maybe it was because she was thinking of her lover as well, and thus she vented all her resentment on Chu Morang, and decided to call for the housekeeper.

The housekeeper arrived before Chu Morang could even explain. She grabbed his hand, "Mister, please do not be angry, My Lady is tired, that's all. She needs to rest, as it is already dark." Without saying another word she took him and the bronze statue out of the Hua Residence.

Chu Morang had never been so humiliated by his Master's orders, the Duke of Zhen-Bei Residence. In the Hua Residence, he had tried to be as courteous as possible because he was aware that it was the residence of the Lady his Master cherished. He went back to the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence and dutifully told his Master, Chu Beijie, about all the series of events that happened.

After he finished speaking, he placed the returned bronze ornament on the table.

Chu Beijie had been reading an official document when Morang had walked in. When Morang finally finished speaking, he laid the document down, raised his head and laughed heartily. "I never imagined she would have such a temper! If she was a man I would definitely put him in charge of my army. That's the quality of one of those capable of commanding thousands of soldiers possesses."

After laughing a while he suddenly narrowed his eyes. "She's clever, I cannot afford to underestimate her."

Chu Moran sighed, "She is very beautiful and her qin skills are extraordinarily. Since Master likes her, why don't you officially propose marriage to her tomorrow, alongside the Duke of Zhen-Bei's flag?"

"No." Chu Beijie contemplated before saying, "It's a nice change from the usual drama here. She is a phoenix and I am simply the worshipper." He stood up, his cloak fluttering, "Well, I'm going to show my adoration now."

"Now...?"

Pingting couldn't sleep that evening either. She wondered if 'Dong Dingnan' would come the next day as she had sent his messenger away in disgrace.

If he did come, she'd first calm his anger, then... naturally ask about the House of Jing-An obviously....she sighed. Her eyes flickered from side to side, feeling anxious. Thinking about the possible but very likely conversation tomorrow with a man whose origins were unknown, yet was actively pursuing her, and she couldn't help but worry.

Active pursuing was fine as she, Bai Pingting, despite wasn't considered pretty, in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, she had had quite a lot of admirers. But this man was so domineering and good at psychological scheming, yet didn't seem cunning at all. Everything about him just felt natural, not in an unpleasant way.

"Pingting, what are you thinking?" she asked herself, facing the window.

Outside, the moonlight was scattered all over the ground. She put on some clothes and went outside to admire the full moon.

Hua Residence's replica of fountain in the daylight usually looked old fashioned but at night, it was rather soothing to look at. The residence was completely silent, even the insects were quiet. Looking up, Pingting could not help but stare at the moon. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash.

A tall figure was perched on the wall, causing Pingting to jump back.

Assassin!

Pingting was just about to yell for help when the figure flew, like it had grown wings, at her. She couldn't even manage to open her mouth before a big hand clamped around her mouth and nose. The smell of an ordinary man flooded into her nostrils.

"Don't speak," the man commanded.

Pingting's eyes twitched in surprise. *It's him?*

Chu Beijie loosened his grip and quietly whispered in her ear, "Are you Lady Hua's maid? I, Dong Dingnan, mean no harm. When I let you go, don't you dare call for help, alright?" He patted the sword at his waist, his words were polite, while his tone was friendly.

Pingting nodded and Chu Beijie could see an intelligent spark in her eyes, and he completely let go of her while chuckling quietly.

His eyebrows were dark, his eyes were bright, his nose was high and there was always a trace of a smile on his lips. It was the first time she had ever seen him up close, and as she remembered her previous memories of him, and she smiled back.

Chu Beijie had always been cherished and praised by the maids in his residence, so he took no notice of Pingting's observations. Instead he asked, "Is the Lady asleep?"

Pingting was worried he would recognise her voice so she simply nodded.

Chu Beijie thought, *before heading to war, one must explore his enemy. This maid must always be around the Lady, so she must know what she likes.* Having this in mind, he asked, "Your Lady likes to play the qin,

but do you know where she learned how to play like that?"

Pingting pointed at the throat and open her mouth twice.

Chu Beijie instantly understood, "You can't speak." He got up and walked right up to Lady Hua's door, paused and listened. Then he just stood there.

What is this person doing? Pingting was fairly worried and refused to leave Chu Beijie side.

She wanted to ask about her Master, but now she was a maid and a mute, so she couldn't afford to be anxious and ask questions.

Chu Beijie saw the worry in her eyes and thought that she had misunderstood his real intentions. "Don't worry, I won't disturb your Lady. I am merely sitting a vigil for my beloved phoenix."

Pingting was stunned as she recalled the Dong Lin tradition. A man would stand outside his lover's door and sit vigil for three nights. They were supposed to protect the person they liked and this usually took place three days before marriage. This 'Dong Dingnan' was brave in a way, to sit vigil for a girl who was not yet engaged to him.

Her heart felt hollow because she was still lying to him. Pingting's eyes dropped, *I don't have any choice. If he finds out who I am or that I'm part of the Jing-An Ducal Residence, he will put me into jail, immediately.*

"You can go back to sleep."

Pingting looked at him, remaining there wasn't right but leaving him was rather awkward. *If he finds out that the 'Lady Hua' he has been talking to was not the real one, then....*

"Go, go back to sleep. This is a Dong Lin man's problem." Chu Beijie had decided to do this to earn the Lady's trust.

Pingting couldn't say anything against that, and went back to her room, head drooping.

Can I even fall asleep? She turned four or five times on her bed, telling herself, *I didn't ask him to sit vigil, so it's not my problem right?* But after a while, she felt really mean again.

She couldn't help quietly getting up again. She peeked out of the window.

Chu Beijie was still standing where Pingting had last seen him and he was staring off into the sky. He was tall and imposing. The dusky moonlight was evenly scattered on him, like a soldier of heaven had descended.

Pingting studied his aquiline nose, like a carver paying attention to the finest details. Chu Beijie suddenly moved and she ducked down, like a frightened rabbit. She was blushing.

She pressed her hand on her chest. It felt like her heart wasn't there anymore.

Why aren't you sitting down and having a rest?

Are you stupid, why do you have to be so serious about a vigil? It is not like there is anyone coming to check on whether you're standing or not, right?

Pingting hoped that the morning would come soon, then he would be able to get some rest too and she wouldn't have to worry about him anymore.

The sky finally became a grey-white, and Pingting hurried to the door.

But before she had actually gone outside her legs felt like jelly and she collapsed.

He hadn't slept for the whole night and she had watched him for the entire night too.

"Aren't we crazy?" Pingting laughed awkwardly at herself. She steadied herself before opening the door to greet Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie had stood for several hours, yet he did not appear to be tired. He had heard her footsteps and he saw yesterday's mute maid approach him.

"You woke up early today, is that because you have to help wash your lady?"

Pingting nodded.

Chu Beijie wasn't planning to talk to her, but when he saw her, he had a pleasantly warm feeling. He had seen many girls before, but none of them had the same golden aura, not to mention a maid having one. Their eyes accidentally met.

Her pupils shone like black crystals.

Her pupils could talk. At first glance, the light looked like a stream running into the blackness of her eyes, but the more he looked at them, the deeper they felt. Her eyes were hiding a thousand words.

Chu Beijie couldn't help saying, "Your Lady must like you as you have extraordinary eyes."

Pingting smiled slightly in reply and Chu Beijie added, "To have such a maid, one can imagine what the Lady is like."

Pingting felt like she had been slapped. Her expression didn't change even when she went into Lady Hua's room.

Lady Hua only just woke at the sound of Pingting's footsteps.

Pingting was quiet throughout the usual routines of washing.

"What's wrong with you today?" queried Lady Hua.

"Nothing much." Pingting debated whether to tell Lady Hua about 'Dong Dingnan' but she chose not to as Lady Hua was bound to mock her.

She was still very worried about her Master, but she was more afraid of people uncovering her identity if she were to ask too much. This pressure in her chest was unbearable enough, so of course she didn't want Lady Hua to laugh at her.

Let that guy stand. He can stand all he wants.

Lady Hua and Pingting finally managed to get out of the bedroom when Pingting came out. Chu Beijie was nowhere in sight.

“What are you looking at? Has the courtyard suddenly become prettier?”

Pingting looked again but Chu Beijie really wasn't there. She thought that the next day he would personally tell the Lady that he sat vigil for her all night. She hadn't thought that he would quietly leave when Lady Hua woke up.

Lady Hua pushed her from behind, “Let's go. The florist agreed to give me two bundles of purple peonies, let's go to the front courtyard to see if they have arrived or not.”

Pingting was still thinking deeply, about halfway there she suddenly exclaimed, “Ai-yaa!”

Lady Hua jumped back, “What?”

If Chu Beijie happened to stay in the morning, if the Lady and I happen to run into him, wouldn't our covers be blown? It's fine to let him know that I'm just a maid, but how do I explain my interest in Master's news? Pingting broke into a cold sweat, what was wrong with me last night? These things didn't even occur to me, I just stupidly watched that guy stand all night!

But whenever she thought of Chu Beijie and that night, she felt unexpectedly happy.

Chapter 06

Pingting looked miserably at her dinner plate. Unexpectedly, Chu Beijie had not visited her that day but she however, had expected him to come and already prepared many questions for him.

The silence was so awkward that even Lady Hua thought that Pingting was acting strangely. She didn't boss Pingting around after dinner, letting her retire for the night immediately.

Pingting hadn't slept at all last night, and even though she was tired, she still could not rest. She opened her eyes wide and stared at the ceiling, her heart thumping madly. She rolled out of bed and peered out of the window.

As expected, there was an extra figure outside Lady Hua's bedroom's door.

He had that solemn, mysterious yet arrogant smile and Pingting quietly observed him. At first she tried to convince herself that he was just plain crazy, but after a long time, she decided that she didn't have the heart to leave him standing there alone.

Chu Beijie was going to stand all night again. He had had a lot of work in the Duke of Zhen-Bei Residence earlier, and when he returned tomorrow he was bound to have even more work. Yet he still came anyway, and he just stood there, thinking of the Lady playing the qin and their conversations, smiling.

He heard footsteps behind him and he turned around. "You again?"

Pingting lowered her eyes. In her hands, there was a chair with a leather cushion. She pointed at Chu Beijie then pointed at the chair.

"I'm not tired, I do not need to sit."

Her eyes which were probably the brightest in the world, suddenly looked sorrowful, piercing his heart. Those eyes made him feel sad at rejecting her kindness.

She stared at him, anxiety, concern and confusion hidden in her eyes. They challenged him until he finally gave up saying. "Fine, fine. Thanks."

Her cute eyes suddenly lit up, like there were two rare, glowing pearls in them. It was as if the ice in Chu Beijie's heart seemed to melt, making him feel very comfortable and that sitting down had been a good choice.

Pingting saw Chu Beijie sit down and turned to leave for her own room.

Chu Beijie watched her while she withdrew to the inner part of the house, perplexed. But he remembered his promise to protect his phoenix and looked away.

After a while, he heard footsteps approach him again. Chu Beijie narrowed his eyes, but did not turn around. As expected, Pingting came back. She put a large plate on the ground. On the plate there were little cups and a jug. It even had some cute snacks on it.

"You sure thought things through."

Pingting had walked a long way to get the snacks from the kitchen. When she heard him praise her she couldn't help but smile appreciatively in response.

Her smile slowly came out, however it wasn't like only her lips was smiling, but it seems like every inch of her face was smiling radiantly. Chu Beijie was suddenly dazed, she was truly beautiful. But when he looked closer, he realised that she was only the mute maid, with two big eyes but nevertheless still rather plain.

He had seen Lady Hua's portrait, she was beautiful.

Pingting was surrounded in moonlight, and Chu Beijie just stared, as if he was a little drunk. *This man has a really strong presence, even here in the Hua Residence. Although he may be sitting in a chair now, his figure is still far bigger than anyone else. Is he a real man?* As Pingting stole another look at him, a tiny, annoying voice flicked across her mind, reminding her of her Master.

"Yes, if I ask him about Master right now, would he answer? The moon is mellow and his expression is rather soft. It probably wouldn't hurt to ask a question or two."

Chu Beijie's determined face bumped Pingting back into reality. "*Now way, how could I do that? This isn't just some average man obsessed with love.*"

Her thoughts had become a scrambled mess and she quickly remembered her real identity. "*Maid Pingting, liar Pingting.*" She felt utterly useless and rotten to the core. She abruptly stood up, not caring about Chu Beijie's gaze, and returned to her own room.

Hiding behind the window she watched Chu Beijie for the whole night again.

The next day Chu Beijie was gone.

But Pingting now hadn't slept for two whole nights, and her coughing had started again. She even had a fever and was very sick.

Lady Hua knew she was sick and ordered her people to find a doctor. She calmly said, "Take your medicine. I'll get someone else to serve me for now, so don't you dare leave this bed today!"

Pingting felt rather light-headed but she knew her health was important. She took Lady Hua's words to heart, taking her medicine and having a good rest.

When she woke up, the sky was already dark.

Lady Hua had just finished eating dinner and had come to check on her. "You really slept for the whole day, I'd say you do look much better too. Your 'Dong Dingnan' came today, but I didn't dare say a word, so I pretended my throat was sore and sent him away."

Pingting answered "*Huh*" and hurriedly sat up, shaking the bed.

"Don't worry, if he really likes you he will come again."

Pingting was really upset, as she had missed a good chance to find out more about her Master. Time was rapidly passing and she still had no idea when she could get back to the Jing-An Ducal Residence. Most importantly, the longer she stayed at the Hua Residence, the more her heart went wild, as if spiralling out of control.

She felt as if she were in quicksand. It wasn't good to move but it wasn't good to stay still either.

Lady Hua didn't know what she was thinking so she assumed that Pingting was still slightly agonising from her headache. She told her other maids to bring Pingting some food and medicine and then she quietly left.

That night, Chu Beijie came again. He was still standing outside Lady Hua's bedroom, but he was listening intently to his surroundings. The mute maid's figure seemed to circle and circle around him but whenever he tried to grab it, it would disappear. Chu Beijie wasn't very happy with himself, *aren't I here to protect my phoenix?* He felt disappointed not to be loyal to the person he liked but unfortunately for him, he could just not forget the maid's eyes.

Those shiny pupils that seemed to silently convey a thousand words.

He once again heard footsteps and a happy tune floated in his mind. He turned around eagerly. Suddenly his face darkened, “What’s wrong?”

Pingting was taking slow steps, as if she was going to collapse any time. Chu Beijie held out his hand, then grabbed her wrist to steady her.

Her hand was abnormally warm.

“You’re sick?” he asked.

Pingting shook her head rapidly, trying to hide the tears in her eyes. She had spent a long time being alone and although Lady Hua, Mrs Hua and Mother Chen had all been worried about her, she had never felt happier listening to the short question this person had just asked her.

Those two words were enough to comfort her.

She gave a small smile and Chu Beijie saw her sad little dimples. That sight captured Chu Beijie’s heart. He had completely forgotten about his beloved phoenix. He rushed forward, and collected her in his arms protectively.

“Is that your room?” He asked.

Pingting nodded. She wanted to protest but instead she bit hard on her lip.

Chu Beijie carried her swiftly to her room.

“Go rest. It is very late and you’re sick. Doesn’t your Lady look after you?” He went into her room and placed Pingting gently on the bed.

He always did what he what he wanted, and cared nothing for gender customs. He clumsily tucked Pingting into bed, before straightening up.

“Sleep.” He watched the eyes he liked, closed. His voice had lost its usual colour and the way he told Pingting to go to sleep was more like the everyday voice he used to command his soldiers.

Pingting, however, only felt comforted by it. She closed her eyes obediently but opened them after a while.

Chu Beijie was thinking of leaving when he realised that this ‘soldier’ had not listened to him. “Close your eyes, go to sleep.”

Pingting suddenly felt amused, it reminded her of teasing her Master. She opened her eyes again and stared quietly at Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie suddenly felt his heart speed up upon meeting her gaze and a feeling he had never felt before flooded through him. It was even happier than the pleasure and rush he felt on the battlefield.

He wasn’t too pleased about this, because as the Duke of Zhen-Bei, he’d been through all sorts of situations

and was always been able to have what he wanted. It was like one of his heart's muscles had been torn, leaving him with heavy breathing.

The little mute on the bed was undoubtedly a beauty; ignoring her face, nose and mouth. She had an incomparable elegance which no one else had and that was what made her beautiful.

"Close your eyes." Chu Beijie cleared his throat, "I'm going out."

Pingting felt rather disappointed but this time she really close her eyes.

Chu Beijie was a true gentleman, he really went out.

Another night. Tougher than last night; tougher than the night before.

Pingting only fell asleep in the morning and she slept until noon. Lady Hua hurried in and whispered in her ear, "Do you know who Dong Dingnan is?"

Pingting heart thumped a little.

"I'll tell you, he is Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei! I saw his portrait yesterday but oh God, he's the mighty Duke of Zhen-Bei!"

Pingting suddenly paled, her body gave out twice before she managed to prop herself up with difficulty.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei? Dong Dingnan, that was the guy who sat vigil at night, the man who carried her was the Duke of Zhen-Bei — A duke of Dong Lin, Dong Lin's strongest warrior, Gui Le's enemy and Master's scariest opponent.

Lady Hua must have thought this was a miracle and kept on praising Pingting. She then patted her on the shoulder, saying, "Hong, we're like sisters, so you will help me right?"

"Eh?"

"It's easy, I've already sent Mrs Hua to pass a letter onto the Duke of Zhen-Bei. It says that Lady Hua is currently engaged and not a free woman. It says that if he is willing to exert his authority and cancel my marriage, it will be easier to carry things out in the future." Lady Hua looked pleased at herself, "This time Father won't protest against it and when my marriage is cancelled, I'll tell the Duke of Zhen-Bei the truth. I'll even give you a good wedding dress. Oh yeah! You can have my wedding dress."

Pingting's face clouded halfway through Lady Hua's chattering. "Are...are...you crazy? The Duke of Zhen-Bei is much stronger, ten times stronger, than your family. If he finds out that we've been lying to him, the people of the Hua Residence will be in deep trouble." She was still very sick so she couldn't emphasise how serious this was.

Lady Hua took no notice, "He likes you. I'm sure he won't mind the fact that you borrowed my identity."

"It's not like that!" Pingting grabbed her, "Tell Mrs Hua not to send the letter."

Lady Hua felt a little scared seeing Pingting so angry. Her head drooped in shame, “But Mrs Hua just came back, she even told me the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s response.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, tomorrow, Lady Hua will be free again.”

“Tomorrow?”

Lady Hua saw Pingting’s strange expression and she pouted. “I need to practice qin, talk to you tomorrow.” Then she left.

Pingting stared into space for a while, until she re-organised the events in her head.

“No way, the Duke of Zhen-Bei, he really was the Duke of Zhen-Bei....” Pingting thought deeply for a moment, then the light in her eyes flashed, showing that she’d made her final decision. *“I still haven’t found Master, I can’t be bound here for no reason. As for Hua Residence...good luck.”*

She somehow managed to get up and pack up her belongings. She felt rather heartless when she thought of how kind the people of Hua Residence had been to her. No matter what though, she still had to go. She was in Dong Lin, the enemy’s country, and if the Duke of Zhen-Bei ever found out her real identity, the Hua family would in even more trouble than before.

She went through a rarely used back door and no one noticed. Just like that, Pingting had left the Hua Residence behind.

That night she stayed at a restaurant. She was probably used to seeing Chu Beijie sit vigil as she could not fall asleep, leaving her thoughts to repeatedly torment her throughout the night.

What was truly worrying however was the fact that her coughing was getting worse. One cough after the other, no sign of it getting any better.

The city was very quiet, the next day. She was too sick to go outside so she asked one of the staff about the outside world, but apparently nothing notable had happened.

She coughed another night away. On the morning of the third day, the worker gave her some boiling water. “Something big happened last night! The rich Hua family, for some reason, has made the Duke of Zhen-Bei so angry that he has ordered all of them to be beheaded.”

Pingting was suddenly alert but she tried hard not to look too interested. “What? All of them are to be beheaded?”

“I don’t know what has made the Duke of Zhen-Bei so angry.” The worker sighed, “The Hua family must have done something extremely shameful to deserve something like this. Our Duke of Zhen-Bei is actually very kind.”

Pingting hadn’t heard the last two comments. She had guessed that Chu Beijie would be very angry, but she hadn’t expected him to sentence so many people to death.

Chu Beijie's strong yet stubborn face crossed her mind and she closed her eyes. Yes, she had always known that he could not be trusted. He may be a gentleman, but when it came to war, he was the bloodiest demon ever. Pingting had heard about the Duke of Zhen-Bei's cruelty and the blood shed from Gui Le soldiers was more than enough to flow a river.

"Is he going to kill all of the people of Hua Residence?" Pingting stared at the table and chair in front of her, which was slowly blurring away with her tears. She shook her head, *"No way..."*

Even if the Duke of Zhen-Bei destroyed ten big families like the Hua family, the people of Dong Lin wouldn't protest at all.

Sir Hua, Lady Hua, Mrs Hua, Mother Chen, You'er, Zi Hua....all of these people's heads would be cut off, leaving a bloody mess. Pingting chest tightened, like she was about to vomit.

"No, I can't just sit and watch them die." She gripped the sides of the bed, slowly pulling herself up.

The Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence was even more solemn than usual and two lines of guards stood outside. The maids serving inside were walking on their tiptoe and if anyone had an itchy throat, they had to secretly go to a place far from the Duke and cough there.

Even Chu Moran, who was usually so calm, was sweating while standing inside his office.

Chu Beijie looked up from his official papers, "You're hot?"

"No."

"Wipe the sweat off your face then."

"Yes."

Chu Beijie wasn't quite as flustered as Pingting had imagined.

Two days ago, he had dealt with Lady Hua's fiancé's household to undo the Lady's engagement. He had spent the whole night preparing for the Lady but when he visited her again, she had told him the truth. He hadn't rolled his eyes, hadn't yelled at them and hadn't lost his temper either. He just stood in front of Pingting's room for a little while and then left.

Back then, Lady Hua had thought the danger had already passed. She had smiled innocently at the housekeeper, saying, "Well I was right wasn't I? The Duke of Zhen-Bei is a really kind person, Hong was really worried for no reason."

Back in the Residence, Chu Beijie had sat down and slowly sipped a cup of hot tea. Chu Moran stood at one side, trying to keep his breathing quiet, for he knew that his Master was beyond cross. He was extremely angry.

As expected, after the cup of hot tea he quietly ordered, "Tomorrow, at sunset, execute the entire Hua family in front of this Residence."

Finally hearing Chu Beijie's voice, Chu Moran sighed in relief. "Yes."

"Don't miss out on anyone, even the dog," Chu Beijie added.

Now the sun was about to set. All members of the Hua Residence were bound and crying. The guillotine's blade had been sharpened, as if waiting for the Duke of Zhen-Bei's command to chop its victim's sleek neck.

"Duke," Chu Moran looked at the sky, "It's about time."

"It's time?" Chu Beijie looked around, and it was unnaturally silent. He looked at the sky, yet the miracle he was hoping for had not occurred. His face turned stone cold and an unusual bloodthirsty sneer appeared on his face. "Execute them."

But before his words could be registered, they were replaced with soft music. The luxurious sound bounced off the walls of the Ducal Residence, through the windows and into Chu Beijie's ears.

"When there is trouble, there are heroes.... when there are heroes there are beautiful women. Surviving the turmoil, surviving the turmoil..." It was faint, but it was definitely the song back then. He couldn't help smiling at the warm and pleasant tone...

"If there are soldiers, there will be fame; if there is fame, there will be fraud; soldiers know fraud, soldiers know fraud..."

The qin's sound was very pleasant to hear. At times it would be as delicate as a spider's thread, other times it would appear like a soaring bird, high up into the clouds, but other times flying low, just above the grassy plains below.

The corners of Chu Beijie's mouth lifted.

Chu Moran was too amazed at the amazing sound and had only just remembered to pass on his Master's order. But he suddenly heard Chu Beijie say, "Don't kill them yet. Bring the girl who's playing that qin into my Residence."

"Yes!"

Soon Chu Beijie's eyes landed upon the jet-black iris he loved yet hated at the same time.

This time her eyes were trained on him, not angrily, not mischievously, not scared nor even pleased. Pingting just watched him and humbly bowed. "I am here, Duke."

Chu Beijie was surprised to hear the familiar voice from behind the blinds. He pursed his lips.

Narrowing his eyes at her, he said, "Today my perception of life seems to have widened. You are the Lady and the maid. You are mute yet you can sing. If there is anything else you can do let me see it."

The Duke of Zhen-Bei's voice was threatening, which was usually enough to make the bravest of warriors

shake, yet she was neither angry nor afraid.

Pingting smiled, pretending to look hurt, "Duke is angry?"

Chu Beijie harrumphed coldly, asking a question instead, "I'm assuming you fully understand that 'soldiers know fraud' meaning; that while sometimes fraud leads to victory, fraud can also lead to disastrous defeat?"

"The victor will always decide the fate of the defeated." Pingting's face turned serious and she sighed, "If so, then feel free to punish me, Duke." She bowed her head.

Chu Beijie secretly smiled at her bowed head. He grabbed the jade pendant on the table and slowly thumbed it. "I know what your point is, you don't want the Hua family to be destroyed. I guess that's a pretty good conscience for a maid. Fine, I'll forgive the Hua family for now, but..." He thought for a moment and coldly said. "You must stay here."

"Stay in the Ducal Residence and serve Duke?"

Chu Beijie mused, "Or do you plan to be my duchess or something?"

Without another word, she slowly bowed at him.

Chapter 07

Hong, her name was Hong. This name wasn't as interesting as the person herself. Chu Beijie had just gained another common maid but he felt much more excited than usual for some reason. It was like he'd come across a 'once-in-a-lifetime' preciousness, or a deliciously exotic cuisine and couldn't wait to taste it, but at the same time, couldn't bear to ruin it.

The new maid, Hong, had lied to the Duke of Zhen-Bei, had been caught by him and was now locked in a small room of his Ducal Residence, away from everyone else.

Chu Beijie wanted to see her, but for some reason he kept on stopping himself.

He wasn't a god, so of course he was angry. Several times he had woken up in the middle of the night, grinding his teeth and fists clenched, thinking that he, a Duke, got all messed up by a maid and ended up standing in front of another woman's door. His pride as a man was absolutely torn into shreds. He wanted to torture that damned girl, throw her into jail, leave her in the forest to the wolves and then throw her off a cliff.

"Someone!"

"Here! What does Duke need?"

Chu Moran appeared at the doorway but Chu Beijie had suddenly calmed down again.

No, he couldn't let her die so easily. That girl should stay in his residence for her whole lifetime, to repent for her crimes. He'd sometimes go to tease her, and make her cry.

The next day, Pingting got sick, just when Chu Beijie had planned to taunt her.

“Sick?” Chu Beijie’s eyes flickered towards Chu Moran and he coldly laughed, “Is this another one of her deceptions, ‘soldiers know fraud’?”

“The doctor has already seen her. She is seriously sick.” Chu Moran replied, his voice grave.

Chu Beijie’s eyes flashed, “What does she have?”

“Long-term symptoms, continuous coughing and drowsiness.”

Chu Beijie thought of that night when Pingting had also been sick, and he had personally carried her into her room. He remembered those energetic eyes slowly close and how under the moonlight, he had truly thought she was a real beauty.

“Duke...are you going to see her?”

A sharp gaze turned to Chu Moran, forcing him to take a step back. He lowered his head and hurriedly said, “I-I-I just thought...maybe...”

Chu Beijie looked away and sat back at the desk, grabbed an official document and carefully read it. Then in a hesitant voice, he asked “Which doctor did you hire?”

“Chen Guanzhi.”

“She’s just a maid, no need to provide her a famous doctor.”

Chu Moran had hardly ever been criticised by his Master and he paled, “Okay, I’ll change it immediately...”

“No need,” Chu Beijie picked up a pen, flamboyantly wrote two lines of approval on the document. He seemed to have calmed down a little, “He’s already been hired, so don’t bother anymore.”

“Yes.”

“Is she taking her medicine?”

“We’ve already bought the items on Chen Guanzhi’s prescription and it’s currently being boiled.”

Chu Beijie scowled, “She rebelled against me and yet she still gets a famous doctor and boiled medicine. Nice timing to get sick. Unfortunately for her, I’m a warrior from the blood-stained deserts, not a naive boy from flowery plains. When she gets better, tell her to stop playing her games in my residence.”

Chu Moran could sense his master’s wrath and he remained as quiet as possible, nodding, “Yes.”

He was about to leave when Chu Beijie looked up from his documents again, as if he had another thought. “The King gave me two boxes of Yumei Tianxiang pills. Since we don’t have any high-ranking females in this residence, I thought they’d go to waste. Now that we have an ailed woman here, we can give those to her.”

Pingting really was sick. Although she was naturally healthy, she had never quite recovered from the cold she had from the last outing, which had been followed by a series of numerous incidents. Her strength was steadily leaving her body. During the last short conversation she had with Chu Beijie, her clothes were almost soaked in sweat and she could barely stand anymore.

Chu Moran was in charge of looking after Pingting. Unable to guess his Master's true intentions, he didn't dare to act too nice or too mean to her. After a long while of considering, he finally put her in a small building in a secluded part of the Ducal Residence.

Every day, Chu Moran would report Pingting's health. "Miss Hong was rather drowsy today."

"Miss Hong had some porridge."

"Miss Hong coughed a little less last night, but she had a high fever this morning."

Chu Beijie didn't say anything and pretended not to hear.

On the fifth day however, Chu Beijie felt rather edgy. When he heard Chu Moran say "Miss Hong coughed again today..." he suddenly turned furious. "Cough!Cough! Cough! Why is she still coughing? Haven't you already given her the Yumei Tianxiang Pills? That Chen Guanzhi is also to blame...he can't even cure a girl."

Chu Moran left and the next day, he was keen not to make the same mistake as yesterday, "Her coughing has gotten a lot better. She should be able to get up soon."

"And when is that?"

Chu Moran hadn't expected his Master to answer, nevertheless to even ask a question. "Maybe... around ten days," he said uncertainly, as how was he supposed to know?

Chu Beijie harrumphed once, not acknowledging or denying his statement.

By the tenth day, before Chu Moran could begin his daily report, Chu Beijie stood up and declared, "Let's go and visit her to see whether her 'desperate measure' has come to an end." He briskly strolled out of the office, and headed to the room Pingting was living in.

The building had a little courtyard outside it and small, unknown red flowers were planted there.

Chu Beijie briskly walked right up to the door but suddenly paused and moved towards the window. He heard a conversation, one of the voices very familiar.

"Anything else?"

"Way more." A soft, gentle voice, with a hint of humour. "For example, when making bone soup, cut the bone in parallel, horizontally, revealing a line of marrow. Don't break it and bind it with chestnut, or you'll lose its unique flavour. Mix rhodiola, cynomorium, powdered lemongrass roots, fry the mixture and put it into the soup. Add the bones and wait for it to be half-cooked before adding fresh lotus roots and carrot.

After that, close the lid and boil lightly until fully cooked.”

“Strange, I’ve been working in the kitchens for many years, but I’ve never heard of such a recipe. Wow, I’m hungry just by listening to that.”

Chu Beijie continued listening for a while. They were all top cooking techniques, despite most of them hadn’t been heard of.

Pingting felt a little better and somehow she had started a discussion about cuisine with Mother Zhang, who had been bringing her medicine ever since she was sick. Her passion was back and she gave away some of her food preparation techniques. Neither of them had heard Chu Beijie outside, so when Mother Zhang looked up and saw him, she broke into a cold sweat.

“Ah! Duke...” Mother Zhang jumped up and managed a wobbly bow.

Chu Beijie didn’t even look at Mother Zhang, his eyes were fixed on Pingting’s cheek, which still hadn’t returned to its usual pinkish radiance.

Mother Zhang nervously excused herself, “I...should be getting back to the kitchen.” She hurriedly picked up the medicine bowls and backed away, nearly tripping over.

The room was even quieter, now that one had left, and it seemed an empty sort of coldness. Chu Beijie’s handsome chiselled features were expressionless and he had the same temperature as a winter day.

Pingting met his eyes, but she quickly lowered them when she felt her heart thump madly.

“Duke is here?” she slowly began to get herself out of bed, managing a slight bow, “I wish Duke good health.”

Chu Beijie narrowed his eyes, clasped his hands at his chest and used a posh voice, which most royalties used. “I heard you were sick?”

Pingting had originally thought that when she was sick, Chu Beijie would visit her because he’d remember their previous times with each other and be nice to her. Then she’d ask about her master and escape. But she’d been sick for ten days, and there’d been no news of Chu Beijie. She told herself it was only natural, but deep down in her heart, it ached bitterly.

He continued in a mocking kind of question, “You’re not beautiful and without the blinds, you can’t play this seduction game, so you’ve swapped to the desperate measure game?”

Seeing Chu Beijie had made her feel happier, but hearing his cold words made her feel completely upset. She mumbled to herself, “I AM sick”.

At that moment, all the pain in her heart from the events that had happened since the separation from her Master, seemed to overwhelm her. Two shiny, transparent tears trickled down her cheek.

Chu Beijie didn’t hear the reply to his question and was about to yell at her when he saw her shoulders quivered. Bending down, he saw two reddish eyes and a tear-stained face. The person in question had

become a crying mess, ever so quietly.

“What are you crying for?” He frowned, “Shut up.”

She didn't want to cry in front of the Duke of Zhen-Bei or infuriate him, so she bit her lip hard.

Chu Beijie watched her. He then grabbed her shoulders, helped her up and said “Don't bite your lips. You may cry now.”

Pingting's wet eyes flickered towards Chu Beijie, her head not moving, refusing to let go of her lip.

Chu Beijie didn't like being disobeyed. He grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him. “If you cry, I'll kill the people of Hua Residence.”

Pingting looked at Chu Beijie's eyes, they were serious. *What is Hua Residence to him anyway?*

When she finally let go of her lips, there was a slight dent on them. She quickly dried her tears and made an unyielding face as she raised her eyes towards Chu Beijie, not wavering even one bit.

What she didn't know was that expression made Chu Beijie's heart skip a beat.

“I've seen a lot of women cry. It's utterly useless.” His words were very close to Pingting's ear and her hammering heart threatened to jump out of her chest.

“Sit here,” he said breezily, pulling her into his arms.

“Ah.....”

“Don't move, or else you'll fall” An unusual powdered scent filled his nostrils. Letting his hand brush across Pingting's face intimately, he asked, “Hey, what powdered scent are you using?”

Pingting was both nervous and embarrassed, for Chu Beijie's smell and heat were clouding her thoughts. She thrashed about weakly, trying to push the mountain-like body away, half wanting it, but half rejecting it. After a while, she gave in and started to relax but still with a roll of her eyes; accepting herself to suffer in Chu Beijie's arms.

“Does it smell nice?” She deliberately softened her voice, her tone like the women at brothels.

She was good at it, for Chu Beijie felt himself stiffen.

She smiled even more sweetly and looked right into his eyes, “You are a well-educated man so I'm sure you've heard of Sifang grass right?”

Chu Beijie's eyes were like lasers, wanting to pierce through Pingting's cheek.

“Sifang grass is an extreme poison, the leaves appear in four colours and its scent is rather sweet.” Pingting replied, “I rebelled against the Duke, meaning my life will be a living hell, so I might as well just end it all by dying.”

She's just a maid, where could she get such a poisonous plant? Chu Beijie didn't believe her at all, but seeing her cute eyes made him hesitate slightly. "Since it's such a rare poison, I must try it." He squeezed Pingting's shoulder, locking her in his arms more tightly and slowly raised her lips towards him.

She could feel his breath against her cheek.

Pingting, although pampered at her residences, had never experienced this kind of situation before. As the man approached her, she was suddenly at a loss. Despite her confusion, she managed to shout, "Moran! Hurry up and tell the King that the Duke of Zhen-Bei kissed me!"

Chu Beijie was confused.

They heard a crash outside. Chu Moran had really been outside and had heard everything. He had knocked over a flowerpot in surprise when Pingting started to yell for him.

"Go tell the King, that His Majesty and the Queen won the bet! The Duke of Zhen-Bei really kissed me!"

It was all too sudden and Chu Beijie thought he had fallen into a trap of some sort. Pingting took this opportunity to kick free with all her remaining strength, roll away and now she was sitting at the opposite end of the bed, hugging her knees protectively while glaring at him.

As she rolled away, Chu Beijie narrowed his eyes, realising that he'd fallen for her trap. "You tricked me," he said in a dangerous voice.

"Beautiful women come flocking to Duke at the wave of your hand, why does Duke want a lowly maid like me?"

"I can choose any woman I want, so why can't I choose a maid from my very own residence?" Chu Beijie smiled angelically and pointed beside him, "Come here."

Pingting was really scared, and even now she refused to budge. However amidst her pale stricken self, she managed to stifle a laugh, "It's easy to have Hong, but Duke will have to bet with me first. If Duke wins, Hong is willing to do anything Duke wants." She had often made bets with her Master and she already knew what she would bet on in a split second.

"Bet?" Chu Beijie pretended to think deeply for a moment, then laughed heartily, "We don't need to bet on anything as you're mine already, aren't you?" Pingting fell silent, clearly unimpressed. Surprisingly, Chu Beijie added, "But I don't want you now. Get better first." He gave her a meaningful look and quickly left the little room.

This time, Pingting was the one who was confused.

After a while, when his back view had disappeared, she came back to her senses. "Geez, such a difficult person to deal with. He uses his retreats to advance further, playing hard to get. Girls' feelings just dance in the palm of his hand." Despite her dark thoughts, she suddenly blushed a bright red as she gazed upon the setting sun outside her window.

Chapter 08

Pingting had spent the last three days resting but she was clearly distracted.

The flowers outside were in full bloom, and they were an extremely enchanting red. However, Pingting's eyes flickered past them, her eyes resting on the lush green leaves.

Chu Beijie hadn't visited her in the last three days.

"It's fine if you don't come..."

She had spent the last three days worrying, afraid of Chu Beijie visiting her again but afraid of him forgetting her little room too. *"What kind of command is 'get better first'?"* She continued to think and blushed a light pink, as if there was a cute kitten playing with her heart. Mother Zhang even said, *"Miss Hong, you seem much better, for you cheeks are pink and tender."*

That afternoon, Chu Moran entered her room, passing on Chu Beijie's words. "No appetite, so make a few dishes and take them to Duke's room."

Cook? Pingting bit her lip, slowly heading for the kitchen.

Chu Beijie was in a good mood today. He waited for three days when usually, as the Duke of Zhen-Bei, he'd get whatever he wanted immediately. He was looking forward to getting along with his cute and intelligent maid.

Hong wasn't pretty, but was interesting enough to deserve his effort and time. Thinking of her and their moments together made him smile a little. Their meeting was sort of destiny as well; for after all, he was a Duke and she was just a lowly maid.

"Besides, she had already suffered from her sickness for ages, God's punishment was enough for her", he thought to convince himself.

Chu Beijie didn't usually forgive people yet he easily forgave this talented girl. It was a fine day. He was planning to eat some of Hong's cuisine, listen to her play the qin, and then seduce her with his charms.

These cheesy thoughts were in his mind, in contrast to the usual killing scenes, all because of a girl who wasn't even pretty.

That is, until after taking a sip of Pingting's soup. His smile had instantly dropped, disappearing completely.

Pingting eagerly studied his reaction.

"My Master never eats anything I make."

Chu Beijie's expression was extremely odd when he nodded. "Your master is very clever, isn't he?" He hesitated before saying honestly, "This soup is disgusting."

Pingting had actually been very worried but seeing his usually-composed, handsome face so distorted was

amusing enough to make her smile, dimples showing.

Chu Beijie sighed, “Now I really know why they say those who know the best recipes can’t always cook well.”

Pingting nodded in agreement, “Likewise. Those who know battle tactics can’t always fight in a war themselves.”

Her comment really suited Chu Beijie’s style. He slapped his hand down on his knee in response, chuckling. “Well said! Well said!” He laughed again but suddenly stopped and stared at Pingting with wide eyes, “Have you fully recovered yet?”

His voice was husky, full of affection. She could feel his ego again and nervously, she took a step back.

It would’ve been better if she hadn’t moved, for Chu Beijie moved even faster. He grabbed her hand and pulled her closer, hugging her waist.

“Kyaa!” Pingting gasped in surprise, as she was being pulled into his chest. Lifting her head, she could see his black eyes watching her playfully.

Chu Beijie had one arm over her, so she couldn’t move. He lowered his head and whispered in her ear, “Dangerous situation. How is My Lady going to counter it?”

His whisper gave her a shock, heart almost jumping out of her throat. She was a little scared, but for some reason, she also felt the impulse to smile. She frowned as she looked at him, “The victor will always decide the fate of the defeated, meaning that further annihilation is unnecessary?”

Chu Beijie wasn’t convinced, and shook his head. “Where are the so-called-defeated, for I haven’t heard any song of defeat yet?”

His mouth was very close to Pingting’s neck and she could feel his breath. Unnerved, she seemed to shrink in his arms. In a delicate and charming voice, she asked, “Since ancient times, there have only been songs of victory. Since when were there songs of defeat as well?”

“You can sing the first and from thereon, it’ll exist.” Chu Beijie smiled threateningly, “If you don’t sing, don’t blame me if I annihilate you.” He moved in to kiss her.

“Don’t...” Pingting felt helpless because this person was just too cunning. She could only glare accusingly at him.

Chu Beijie was temporarily stunned by her glare, but he wanted to kiss her so badly, so he continued to inch closer. That was when Pingting started to sing softly.

“Swallows bring fortune, but too much fortune brings damage. A joy to look, a joy to look...”

As expected, Pingting’s voice was touching and Chu Beijie had closed his eyes, listening in appreciation. He only started to open his eyes several seconds after the song had finished. “From now on, you must never sing in front of others, as you evoke too much emotion and will end up breaking their hearts.” He sighed

twice, his happy expression turning serious. “You are too special to be just a maid from Hua Residence. Who are you really?”

This struck her like lightning. She accompanied her master several times onto battle, was a fair, honest military advisor, and knew battle tactics like the back of her hand. She had even indirectly fought against the famous Duke of Zhen-Bei, this very person in front of her, several times before.

Chu Beijie saw her pale face, feeling love and affection for her. Patting the hair on her forehead, he whispered, “Don’t be scared, just tell me the truth. I’ll definitely protect you. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Pingting gave a bitter smile.

If Chu Beijie knew that she was Gui Le’s Jing-An Ducal Residence’s Bai Pingting, he’d know that she was the one threatened to drown his Zhen-Bei’s army. There was no possibility that he’d protect her if he knew that she knew all sorts of secrets about the House of Jing-An.

The consequences were unthinkable.

“Tell me.” He stared intently into those black pupils, “I’ll help you, whoever you are.”

“I...”

“Tell me.”

Pingting’s eyes flickered towards Chu Beijie’s eyes, which were supportive. She took a deep breath, “I was raised as a qin maid in the Prince, now King’s residence in Gui Le.”

Chu Beijie was stunned.

“Hong’s real name is Yangfeng and I was brought into the Prince’s Residence as a child. However, Prince Su really liked me and so I was taught to play qin so that I could entertain him when he drank wine in the gardens.”

“Yangfeng?” Chu Beijie was a little curious, “Then how did you end up in the Hua Residence?”

Pingting lowered her eyes, sighing. “To be honest, I started to get really popular with my Master. Some people in Gui Le started to get threatened by my influence. I was stupid and naïve. Somehow, I got into deep trouble. I was supposed to die, but two of my friends helped me escaped, only to meet some human traffickers. That’s how I ended up in Dong Lin and then... I met the Duke.” She shrugged and gave a forced laugh, “A series of coincidences.”

Chu Beijie studied her. “I was right. You really are from a royal residence.” He knew all about the royal residential life and naturally, he was sympathetic. “Don’t worry, I bet not even the Queen of Gui Le, but He Su himself can do anything about you.”

For some reason, the tips of Pingting’s ears went slightly red. Seeing how Chu Beijie was being so kind, she hurriedly lowered her head and bowed, “Thank you, Duke.”

Chu Beijie smiled, "You can get up now." He helped her up, particularly paying attention to her hands. "These are good qin hands." He was tightly holding on to them now and probably wasn't going to let go.

Pingting wanted to hide, but she couldn't. It was like Chu Beijie was controlling her heart. She pretended to wipe her hands, but that didn't work either. "Duke..." but she was answered with a teasing smile. Her thoughts were a mess.

Chu Beijie released his hold when he had finally had enough of seeing her blush. "I heard you sing, but now I want to hear you play qin. Hong, no Yangfeng, play something for me."

Pingting nodded and looking in the direction that Chu Beijie had been pointing at, she saw a guqin on the table. When she sat down, she couldn't help noticing that it was the Phoenix Paulownia-Guqin.

The music began again.....

It was like the first time one had seen the Alps, the pine branches decorated with snow and the fierce wind billowing in the background. A scene of sorrow.

Slowly, the wind died away and the snow came again. Though it was still cold, there was more life in it. The snow had yet to stop but some small animals had already come out in search for food. They scurried up the trees and picked some berries. Then they paused, as if they were hearing something. They had disappeared before one even realised it.

The mountains were quiet.

Soon, joyful laughter was heard, far away. Around four children had come to have a snow fight and suddenly, there were balls of snow flying all over the place. They were half-yelling, half-laughing, messing around but either way, they were having fun.

The qin sound came to a joyous end.

Chu Beijie was comfortably leaning on his chair and opening his eyes he said, "Nice but why isn't there a reverberation?"

"There's no set way to interpreting music, so why isn't stopping at the happiest moment acceptable?" She bit her lip.

Their eyes met and they were wondering why their hearts were beating so fast. Finally, Chu Beijie cleared his throat, clapped twice while ordering, "Yangfeng, come here."

Pingting stood up from the guqin, slowly shuffled closer to him. There was about a table's distance between them when she mischievously asked, "Does Duke still plan to drink my soup?"

Thinking of the disgusting soup, Chu Beijie had to shake his head vigorously.

"Then... I'll take it out."

She took the plates, backing rapidly out of the room.

Chu Beijie watched her disappear in bewilderment. Then he clapped quietly.

Chu Moran appeared in the doorway.

“Duke.”

“There’s a qin maid in Gui Le, who goes by the name Yangfeng.” Chu Beijie shrugged, “Research her.”

“Yes, I will begin immediately.”

Pingting had begun to settle down in the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence. It wasn’t hard serving Chu Beijie – it was much like her Jing-An Ducal Residence days. She didn’t have to prepare any tea or do any hard work. All she had to do was to play qin and listen to him.

Everyone in the residence knew that she was special to Chu Beijie, and no one dared to treat her badly. Everyone called her, ‘Miss Yangfeng’.

Summer was not yet over when the water lilies began to bloom. One day, the two were talking after lunch.

“How big is this world?”

“I should be asking Duke instead. How should I know?” Pingting tilted her head, slightly rolling her eyes. “Don’t tell me Duke wants to know, so Duke can command the soldiers to conquer all of it?”

Chu Beijie laughed, “Why not?”

Pingting raised an eyebrow, “I don’t believe the rest of the world will give up so easily. There are four countries. Dong Lin has Duke of course, but the other three... well, even the Marquess of Jing-An in Gui Le isn’t that easy to be taken down.

“He Xia?” Chu Beijie hummed, face breaking into a mysterious smile.

“Oh yeah, back then, what did you mean by saying that I might be able to see the Marquess soon?” Pingting pretended to recall, “I saw him from behind the blinds once back in the Prince’s Residence. He looked heroic and I had a pretty good impression of him. An outstanding person, I’d say.” Before she even realised it, Chu Beijie had his arms over her again.

“Good impression? An outstanding person?” Chu Beijie’s voice was dangerous.

Pingting however, laughed at this. “Are you jealous, Duke?” Seeing that Chu Beijie was indeed jealous, she quietly added “Duke, please don’t be stingy. Besides, I heard that he was targeted by the Gui Le King. Maybe he’s already dead.”

Chu Beijie laughed darkly while shaking his head, “If he dies so easily, he wouldn’t be He Xia anymore.”

Pingting’s heart began to race because she had been waiting for this chance for a long time. “In other words, Duke knows where he is?” She couldn’t control her excitement.

“He Xia escaped from the Gui Le city grounds and Gui Le is currently being monitored by the soldiers. Sigh, I almost caught him a couple of days ago.” Sensing her body shake, he asked, “Yangfeng, are you okay?”

“No, no.” Pingting shook her head, her face very pale. To seem less suspicious, she raised an eyebrow. “Last time, it was Osmanthus. This time, it’s Chinese roses. What’s next?”

“Eh?”

Pingting met his eyes, “Duke keeps using different fragrances.” She pretended to be annoyed.

All traces of his suspicion were gone. Laughing, he said “Why be annoyed, since it’s hard to get certain flowers sometimes? When I choose my Duchess, I won’t look for someone pretty, just for someone who can accompany me to battle.”

“Duke, you haven’t finished with He Xia’s story.”

“What’s there to say? I ordered my spies to report the moment he arrived in Dong Lin, but somehow he managed to know what we were planning. He dodged my ambush and even killed my spy. He’s back in Gui Le somewhere now. That was all for nothing.”

Pingting quietly sighed in relief.

She knew that He Xia was safe and it was time to leave.

Actually, she should’ve left ages ago. She would often ask Chu Beijie whether she could walk around the residence. He ordered someone to follow her from afar on the first couple of times, but after that, he let her walk by herself.

She didn’t have any money for the journey, but the three bracelets Chu Beijie had given her were more than enough.

The route was roughly planned too.

She thoroughly thought things through, but she couldn’t decide when to leave.

Ten days later, autumn came. The leaves were yellower day by day, and they would fall down sooner or later.

It was time to go, but she couldn’t bring herself to leave.

Chu Beijie was used to her playing the qin every day. She would sing, and he’d close his eyes, often smiling in delight.

Those smiles were imprinted in Pingting’s mind. They were so sweet.

She was used to playing qin and singing for him. She knew that something big had happened on the days

that Chu Beijie didn't visit her. Either something unfortunate had happened in the residence or an official had done something wrong. Of course, there were other reasons too.

Like the previous day, Chu Beijie wouldn't let her play qin. "Did you really cough last night? Don't pretend. How could I not know everything that happens in my residence? It's not like I can't afford a doctor, so why didn't you tell me?"

Pingting wasn't there at dinner last night, but little did she know that Chu Moran wasn't there either. He had spent the night making preparations to move Pingting into a better room and making an appointment with Chen Guangzhi.

"Why?" She stared out the window, where the leaves were caught in the wind. "We could be enemies in a way. You bully me, but then you're nice to me. Sometimes you say some pretty harsh things and rarely say something kind. Other times, you act like a real gentleman, but then again, you act like a spoilt Duke." She sighed, "Such an incomprehensible figure. Whoever's with him just suffers."

A maid asked her to visit Chu Beijie. The moment Pingting entered the room, Chu Beijie said, "You'll definitely love the menu today."

Sure enough, there was a selection of delicacies. Among them, there was steamed eggplant and 'eight treasure pickles', all famous cuisines.

"You don't eat much these days. You have to eat a little more today. You see, I got a Gui Le chef to make these." Chu Beijie watched her eagerly as he beckoned her to eat.

Pingting tasted it and the eggplant flavour melted in her mouth. Then she tried the eight treasure pickles but she chuckled straight away, "Duke knows even less than me about cuisine. You got a Gui Le chef, but not all of these dishes are from Gui Le. For example, this eight treasure pickles are a famous Bei Mo dish, so why is it here?"

Chu Beijie sighed, "I see. I'll get someone else to cook for you then."

But Pingting shook her head instead and pointing at the eight treasure pickles dish, she said, "I love these. Duke doesn't know that I'm from Bei Mo after all."

"Eh?"

"Yeah, but I was sold into Gui Le at a young age. This is my favourite dish." She placed a piece of it in Chu Beijie's bowl. "Duke, why don't you taste some?"

The candlelight shone prettily on her cheeks and Chu Beijie couldn't help getting closer to her.

"I want to taste you," were his words.

Pingting's heart almost stopped.

He was too close and tightly holding onto her. It was hard to move. She turned her head and bit down on his ear.

“OW!” His chopsticks fell onto the floor with a clang.

“Duke... no...”

“What ‘no’?” Chu Beijie asked in a hurt voice while stroking his ear, “I chose you way back then, and I refuse to let you run away. I’m going to take you with me on the battlefield in the future.”

Her lips were a tight line but her eyes were like fire, ready to burn anything and everything.

“I want to marry you.” He had let her catch her breath before he said this proposal.

“Duke?” Pingting looked at him bewilderedly. She was frowning, everything had happened all too fast and nothing seemed to fit with her original plan. *Was I not acting ambiguously enough?*

She was supposedly Yangfeng, a Gui Le’s qin maid, an escaped maid.

He was the Duke of Zhen-Bei, and yet he wanted to marry her.

Chu Beijie looked unhappy, “You don’t want to?”

Pingting widened her eyes, Chu Beijie was too close, and she felt very hot. He was very handsome. Everything about him was just strangely charming.

He had always been a proud, arrogant man.

“Marry me.”

“Why?”

“Not only you can play qin and sing well, but you also have nimble hands and owns a heart of gold.” Chu Beijie’s smile was as dangerous as poisonous plants. “I’d much rather choose you over many other women.”

“I...”

“Let’s swear to the moon, never turn against each other.”

Pingting smiled sadly. His words were like warm water, warming her from within. Chu Beijie helped her stand.

“Never turn against each other?” Every word slowly tumbled out of her mouth.

Chu Beijie hugged her tightly, “Yes, from then on, you will be my Duchess and I will be your husband.”

Remembering the Duke of Zhen-Bei on the battlefield, she took a step back.

“No...” She struggled to answer.

“Why not?”

“I am only... a qin maid.”

“I like your qin.”

“I’m not good enough for Duke.”

“I’m good enough for you.”

Yet she still shook her head and biting on her lip, she said “I... I’m not pretty enough.”

Chu Beijie pretended to study her. “I think you’re fine to look at.” He grinned.

Pingting was silent. She rolled her black crystal eyes but she still had a slight heartache. *Leave, tomorrow, I have to leave. This man’s troops have attacked the place I was born, grew up, and is now sitting back and manipulating the King to hurt the people of my residence.*

But Chu Beijie’s embrace was always so warm, and it was hard to leave behind. Despite this, she still pushed him away and even said ‘no’ to him.

Her thumping heart began to calm down. Her complete rationalself hadn’t returned yet, so her thoughts were mainly illogical. She had to go. She had to leave, but she needed something that wouldn’t make her look back.

The word ‘unfulfilled’ flashed into her mind several times.

“Duke,” she mumbled quietly but then she lifted her head and said, “I don’t want to be your duchess, but I...”

She bit down on her lip and remained quiet. Chu Beijie smiled kindly at her, “Continue.”

“No, don’t bother.” It was like she had heard a touching song and Pingting could barely hold back her tears. She took a deep breath, suddenly hugged Chu Beijie hard and as she slowly looking up, she said “It’s destiny that we were to meet, so may we just unite this one time?”

It was difficult for her to ask, but she would finally get what she wanted.

Thoughts of her country were at the back of her mind. Tomorrow would be another story.

She simply didn’t care anymore. Tonight was hers.

And she was his.

Chu Beijie thought he had misheard her and he looked really confused until understanding flooded into his eyes. He laughed. Then, lifting her up, he briskly walked to his bedroom where he placed her down gently on his bed.

Head looking down, he studied her white, elegant hand.

“Let’s be together forever.”

“Yeah.” Pingting nodded, a tear sliding down her cheek.

Underneath her clothes, she was one real flower. Seeing her made something snap inside his mind and he gazed at her.

“Beautiful...” He touched her with his mouth, inhaling her scent. She smelled of sweet flowers.

“Duke...”

“Not Duke.”

She sighed, “Beijie.”

“Back then I was Dingnan, now I’m Beijie.” He noticed that she was a little nervous.

Outside, a full moon was shining.

That night, in the quiet Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence, the two people, respectively from Gui Le and Dong Lin laid together. One losing soul, the other losing heart.

Her sleeping face was serene in the moonlight. Pingting was smiling in her dreams and her breathing was quiet, regular.

She was tired. He could tell back then from her blurry eyes, like the stars were too bright for her.

Her perfect lips, slim waist and her long thin legs were all imprinted in his mind. Chu Beijie’s expression was of happiness, but then for some reason, his smile disappeared. He was frowning.

He walked out of the bedroom, quietly closing the door behind him.

Chu Moran was waiting for him in the office.

Chu Beijie walked inside with heavy steps and he sat down expressionless. Chu Moran handed him a sheet of paper.

—Yangfeng, from Bei Mo, sold into Gui Le at will. Plays qin, is one of the two famous Gui Le qin players.

Favoured by He Su but rarely appears in public.

Loves flowers and plants.

Favourite food: Eight treasure pickles.

Favourite colour: Blue

Never been seen since accused of a crime.

He took out a sheet of paper and looked at it again.

It felt as if the temperature had just dropped several degrees. Chu Moran felt rather uncomfortable.

“Nothing suspicious at all,” Chu Beijie laughed bitterly.

He had rarely seen his master look so helpless and Chu Moran couldn’t help lowering his head and saying, “Duke, could it be that...”

“Two famous Gui Le’s qin players...” Chu Beijie asked in a deep voice, “Who’s the other one?”

“It’s one of Jing-An Ducal Residence’s maids, family name, Bai.”

Chu Beijie closed his eyes and when he opened them again, there was a new light in them. A single phrase left his mouth, “Research her.”

“Yes.”

Pingting only woke up when morning came.

Someone was kissing her shoulder.

Turning to the side, she saw a pair of intelligent black eyes and suddenly she remembered what happened last night. She hid her overheating face in the blankets.

“What’s done is done. No need to hide.” Chu Beijie smiled fondly at her hair. Seeing that she was still hiding, he laughed and playfully bit her shoulder.

“Ow!” Pingting jerked upwards, only to be captured by the waiting Chu Beijie, who planted a fierce kiss on her red lips.

“Hehe, the world’s most delicious breakfast.”

“You... you...”

“What? From now on you must call me ‘husband’.”

Pingting narrowed her eyes, clearly displeased. “Who had agreed to marry you?”

Chu Beijie clamped her hand in his and looking intently into her eyes, he said in a very serious voice, “Marry me. Don’t ever leave me.”

Pingting felt as if she had been stabbed. She just stared.

Chu Beijie was really serious, “Don’t think about it. Come with me. I’m willing to follow you into hell and

heaven.”

Hell and heaven? She raised an eyebrow and stared questioningly at him.

So strong, such pride, such dark eyebrows... isn't he just the ideal guy for every girl?"

If he was by my side, my life would be a lot easier.

But she... but she had to go.

Tears began to brim in Pingting's eyes. She turned away, refusing to let her tears flow.

Chu Beijie put his rough hand on Pingting's cheek. "Hey, why are you crying?"

"I don't know why I'm crying." Pingting dried her tears and managed a wobbly smile.

The more she thought about it, the more it hurt, but she had already convinced herself that she needed to go.

What's the point of missing him? She had to let go of Chu Beijie's laughter, hurt, anger, and happiness.
Master is in danger. I can't just become a duchess for no reason.

Go, she had to go.

It was supposedly an auspicious year anyway.

She carefully studied Chu Beijie whenever she could. Being hugged by him always resulted in a sleepless night. However, the weather was bad in every way possible, and she could not fall asleep without clutching onto his warm hand first.

Sometimes, Chu Beijie's deep sigh would pass by her ear and her heart would hurt.

She often wondered how he could possibly be so wild.

Politics, campaigns and blood battles. He even refused to rest in his dreams.

Had to go, she had to go. She had fallen into a life-claiming quicksand pit. It was difficult to move out of it, but she had to.

"October's Osmanthus fragrance fills thy head..."

The sweet aroma filled her lungs and she glanced back. Though her heart was cold, she remembered Chu Beijie's sweet smile.

Chu Beijie had whispered to her, "When spring comes, all the flowers here will be in full bloom. When that time comes, I'll personally pick a flower for you every day."

"I'm not beautiful, so wouldn't I be shadowed by a pretty flower?"

“Fine. You can sing. Sing until the flower withers.”

The sound of Chu Beijie’s laughter filled the empty courtyard.

In her heart, Pingting wept with sadness.

When spring comes, when all the flowers here will be in full bloom, you will be in Dong Lin and where will I be?

Chapter 09

For the next twenty or so days, Chu Beijie refused to leave her side, as if worried about losing her. He watched her like a hawk, like a hungry person in front of food.

Pingting's heart melted like ice against the summer heat.

“Where's Moran these days?”

“I got him to do something, he only came back yesterday.”

“What was so important that you actually had to send him away?”

Chu Beijie saw the raised eyebrow on her face and sighed. “The most important thing in this world is that you stay with me.”

Pingting rolled her eyes and wrinkled her nose, “Flattery.”

“You aren't wrong, my mouth is flattering. Duchess, try it.” He took the opportunity and kissed her, only letting go when he heard a faint “nnnn” from her. He broke away, put on a serious look and said, “Let’s go back inside.”

“No!” Pingting clenched her fists and hammered them against his back. “You pervert, I am not going back.”

Another squeal and she’d already been picked up by Chu Beijie.

“Geez, not again...give me a break.”

Chu Beijie laughed, “You can take a break later.”

It was already the season of floating snowflakes, yet Pingting had still not found a good time to leave the Ducal Residence. She had almost torn her handkerchief, from worrying about it.

Today was supposed to be the best day, as Chu Beijie would be away all day, but he just had to tell Chu Moran, “Look after my future Duchess until I get back.”

Pingting was determined this time to not let such a great opportunity to slip away. She stood outside the door for a long time, watching him ride his horse away from her, as it would be the last time she'd ever see him.

Chu Moran approached her and stopped respectfully at a distance. “Miss Yangfeng, its cold, please come inside.”

As Chu Beijie’s figure disappeared from sight, Pingting gathered her thoughts. She turned around, lips playing into a smile. “I suppose it’ll snow tomorrow.” She stepped back inside the main gates and she could see Chu Moran standing rigidly behind her.

“Moran, you should do your other work.”

“Duke ordered to protect Miss Yangfeng today.”

Pingting's face was as cold as stone. “You're monitoring me?”

“Wouldn't dare to.”

“I want to go outside. Are you going to tie me up and report to Duke?”

“Wouldn’t dare to.” As expected of Moran, his voice was level and his face ever expressionless.

Pingting lowered her head, pensive. She started to chuckle, “I guess that was wrong of me. I'm not in a very good mood right now because Duke isn't here and started to vent my frustration on you.”

Moran's face studied her. Her face was gentle.

Sleeping gas or sleeping pills? Pingting quietly calculated as she walked inside.

Unfortunately, she had neither at her disposal. The contents of sleeping gas were hard to get and there were too many ways of making sleeping pills. There was a relatively easy recipe, but she would require certain common herb for that one.

She, who used to hate the time when she had to learn these things with her Master had now found the information to be quite useful..

Sleeping pills it is then.

“Cough.....cough.....” She coughed two times.

Chu Moran took two careful steps towards her: “Is Miss Yangfeng feeling unwell? I'll get Chen Guanzhi...”

“No need, the herbs he prescribes never work, even when I have a lot, I don't recover fast enough.” Pingting pretended to frown, “I'm sure my own prescription will be much better than his.” She sat down at a table and wrote a list, then handed it to Moran, “Here. Buy these for me.”

Pingting calmly watched Chu Moran scanned the list.

He couldn't find anything suspicious and consented. He turned to the nearest guard and had him fetch the ingredients for the medicine on the list Pingting had written.

Not seeing anything suspicious, Chu Moran nodded approvingly “Alright”. He handed the list to a guard, “Go, and get the herbs on this list.”

Pingting smiled before retreating into her room, and closed the door behind her.

Chu Moran stood outside the door.

The room was gorgeous, Chu Beijie had personally designed and selected each piece inside himself. Bronze mirrors glowed and beautiful carvings adorned the room. On an exquisite dressing table that was placed in the corner there were three strands of jet black hair on it. These had fallen off while Chu Beijie washed her hair today.

Pingting felt a wave of nostalgia rushed through her and sighed. She ambled to the dressing table and opened the jewellery box.

Every woman's lifetime desires could be found within that box: gold hairpins, jade rings and brooches and an exquisite pearl necklace.

She picked a three unremarkable ones out of the lot and proceeded to hide them up her sleeve.

Everything was now ready. As soon as the sleeping pills were made, she would use them on Moran and after that, everything would be much easier.

She took a deep breath, pushing all of her desires to the back of her mind.

The bodyguard had already been taking a long time and almost two hours had already passed by. Pingting didn't want to ask Chu Moran since she did not want him to have any suspicious at this critical time. She decided to start coughing again. Outside, Chu Moran listened to her 'sickness' and only then, did he feel obliged to ask “Why haven't the herbs here already?” to one of the other guards beside him. It was in that moment, when someone suddenly came in.

“What's wrong, you feeling unwell again?” Chu Beijie strode towards her. “It's cold today, so don't just sit there,” he murmured.

“Why're you back so soon?” Pingting was surprised, she hadn't expected to see Chu Beijie beside her today, “Have you finished your work yet?”

“Not yet, but Moran said you were sick and coughing really hard, so he told someone to fetch me.”

Pingting instantly began to detest Chu Moran. She bit down on her lip, he had ruined her chance to escape. She brightened, “I'm fine. Moran was over-exaggerating; you don't need to worry about me. You should go back to your work. You're a Duke, so don't spend your time with a woman all day.” She gently pushed him away.

“Haha, finally you're acting like a duchess.” Chu Beijie let go of her and said, “It's nothing important though. I just caught someone close to He Xia and I was in the middle of questioning him when I heard that you were sick, so I came here.”

Pingting's body jolted at the mention of her companions but she hid it by pretending to cough.

Chu Beijie patted her on the back, "What's wrong? You said that you were fine, but I reckon we have yet to cure the root of your disease. I've ordered them to find the best medicine already."

Pingting stopped coughing, looked up and asked, "What about you? If you don't question the prisoner, how are you supposed to report to the King?"

"I've already asked some people to bring him here. I can question him within my own residence."

"Who is this very important person?"

"He isn't that important, just a brat called Dongzhuo."

Pingting registered the figures in her head, face expressionless. "I've heard of his name before, he's one of the Marquess of Jing-An's favourite attendants. He once accompanied the Marquess of Jing-An when he visited the Prince's Residence."

Chu Beijie stroked her hair, "Do you want to accompany me?"

The trial was to be held in a dungeon.

Fire blazed as bright as day and it illuminated the odd shapes of the various instruments of torture. The walls and ceilings were dyed black with blood.

Pingting never have been there before, so she closely followed Chu Beijie while at the same time studied her surroundings.

The sturdy prison walls were certainly not going to be easy to escape from, she secretly noted to herself.

Chu Beijie's breath was warm in her ear as he whispered, "If you start to feel afraid or nervous, don't forget to hold me tight."

Pingting nodded her head feeling pathetic and Chu Beijie burst into laughter.

At the end of the long, stone corridor, the fire suddenly lit up the wall. A teenage boy was hanging in the air, his arms and legs shackled by heavy chains. His head was down.

Pingting looked at him and instantly knew that he really was Dongzhuo. His clothes were tattered but he hadn't many scars. She quickly came to realise that he hadn't been tortured yet.

"Brat, wake up! Our Duke is here," said the person who was in charge of the prisoners, as he nudged him with a whip. He raised Dongzhuo's chin to look at Chu Beijie.

There was an invisible, but frosty glow in Dongzhuo's eyes as he stared at Chu Beijie. "Hmph, Chu Beijie."

The House of Jing-An's worst enemy was standing right in front of him.

“I don't plan to harm you. I am simply an admirer of the Marquess of Jing-An and I would like to persuade him to ally Dong Lin.” Chu Beijie smiled again, very sincerely, “After all, the Marquess of Jing-An can no longer go back to Gui Le, so isn't it a good idea for him to find new loyalties?”

“Whatever you say, I won't tell you anything,” was Dongzhuo's cold reply.

Chu Beijie shook his head and with a sympathetic-looking face, he said, “I admire tough boys, but unfortunately not many remain tough in my hands.” He took a step back and nodded at one of his subordinates.

Pingting, who had been hiding behind Chu Beijie, instantly knew that he was going to whip him. The sound of the whip pierced through the air.

Chaa!

The whip came in contact with flesh and Pingting shuddered at the sound.

Chaa! Chaa! Chaa!

More consecutive sounds of strong, powerful whipping could be heard. It was hard to breathe.

The sound of metal chains clinking in protest slowly decreased, minute by minute.

The whip severely hurt Dongzhuo, but he suffered in silence, not saying a word.

Chu Beijie blocked Pingting's view, seemingly noticing that she was shaking. He gently patted her on the back. She looked up and saw his merciless expression.

“You're still not going to tell me?” Chu Beijie was getting annoyed, “You know, the whip is the most common torture in prisons. And yet, this can only be counted as an appetiser because when I use the main dishes, you might even end up losing your life.”

With a hoarse voice, Dongzhuo calmly replied, “There isn't a single person from the Jing-An Ducal Residence who is afraid to die!”

Chu Beijie chuckled at this and Pingting could almost hear his evil intentions from his chilling, dangerous smile. Things did not look good for Dongzhuo.

Then turning to Pingting, Chu Beijie softly assured her, “Why is your face so pale? Are you afraid? Do not fear, for I am here.”

“There's a lot of blood,” she replied timidly, flinching.

The chains suddenly thumped, as if Dongzhuo had realised something.

“Afraid of blood?” Chu Beijie shook his head and jokingly added, “If my wife is afraid of blood, how is she supposed to accompany me onto the battlefield?”

Pingting's delicate and pretty face weakly smiled at Chu Beijie. She could see Dongzhuo out of the corner of her eye, suspended in the air, covered in blood. Dongzhuo's eyes were wide with disbelief, but somehow he managed to understand her situation and so he hung his head instead.

"I feel uncomfortable." She touched Chu Beijie's forehead and leaned on him.

Such feminism on her part was unusually rare for him to see. He was naturally overcome with sympathy and affection so he asked, "Where do you feel uncomfortable? I shouldn't have asked you to come with me."

Pingting ignored Dongzhuo. She looked into Chu Beijie's eyes. "It's stuffy in here, I want to cough, but I can't. Get someone to take me out, you deal with your work first."

"I'll come with you."

"Your work..."

"You're more important."

Before she could protest, he had already lifted her up again.

"Ah!" Pingting yelped in surprise and she blushed harder when she remembered that Dongzhuo was watching them. She buried her head in Chu Beijie's arms in shame.

The jailer stepped forward with a blood-stained whip in his hands. "Duke, that prisoner..."

"Guard him carefully, he's someone from the Jing-An Ducal Residence. Hmm, I'll do the questioning myself tomorrow."

"Yes." The jailer had another thought, "Would you like more people to guard him?"

Chu Beijie snapped, "Is it possible that He Xia would try to break into my residence?"

"Yes yes, understood."

Chu Beijie took her away from the scene in his arms. Though Pingting was still hiding in his arms, her eyes were as wide as saucers. She studied and took mental notes on where each guard was standing, how many there were and memorised the route back.

The moment they entered her room, a warm feeling spread through them. It was much more welcoming than the dungeon air.

"Don't get cold", Chu Beijie tucked her into bed. He ordered someone to bring a cup of hot tea.

"I'm not thirsty," said Pingting, frowning.

The tough yet gentle aroma of hot tea watered into her lips.

He ordered light refreshments.

“Not hungry either.”

She was still protesting, but then she had already eaten all of the refreshments.

After refreshments, it was Chu Beijie’s turn to eat ‘dessert’.

“Hey...you...can't be serious....”

“I'm never serious around you.” He kissed her, his tongue coming in, like a wind sweeping through her teeth. She struggled, but he was too strong as she began to lose control of herself.

Finally, she managed to kick away, her bright eyes pleading. “I...ahh, um...cough cough.” She refused to meet Chu Beijie's commands and the only way she could get away with it was by coughing.

Chu Beijie was surprised and he hurriedly took a step back, “You’re really sick? I know you're afraid of blood, but soon, you'll get used to it.” Then, he raised his voice, “Someone! Get Chen Guanzhi to come here!”

Pingting tugged at his sleeve, “No need. Having plenty of rest will do the trick. Besides, I don't like Chen Guanzhi's prescriptions. They're simply too bitter.”

“Bitter medicine is good medicine.” Chu Beijie looked back at her, his face charming. “If you really don't like him, I'll find you another doctor.”

“Why find another? I already gave Moran the prescription I made today...”

They suddenly heard something outside the room.

“Duke, the King has summoned you.”

Chu Beijie touched Pingting's hand, “Why in the middle of the night?”

Chu Moran's reply was curt. “The group that we sent to Bei Mo seems to be in trouble...”

Chu Beijie groaned in dismay. Pingting, who had been waiting for him to leave, eagerly pushed his shoulders. “Your work is important, don't make the King worry.”

“Then...you must stay here, I'll get them to boil the herbs.”

“Don't stall, I'll ask them. Go.”

Chu Beijie's face was one of guilt. “I'll be back as soon as possible.”

“Okay.”

She watched Chu Beijie disappear, feeling a rush of excitement as she jumped out of bed.

She patiently listened for movement, took a deep breath before going to the window. Her alert eyes scanned the situation outside, through a small gap.

Chu Moran seemed to have gone with Chu Beijie, as he was no longer standing outside her door.

Her lips broke into a sly smile, as she turned around to grind the selection of herbs on the table.

“Unique remedies and sleeping gas.” She said to herself, “There aren't many guards in the dungeon, so this should be more than enough.”

She took out a box underneath her bed. There was a sleeping gas bomb inside it.

“If he knew, I don't know what he'll do to me.” Her heart ached slightly and Pingting's face had a touch of resentment. She sighed, “oh well, it doesn't matter if I'm afraid of him...”

She pushed away those thoughts. “Don't think about it, I have to help Master and Dongzhuo.”

Although she'd already finished planning ages ago, it took around fifteen minutes for her to get ready.

Pingting looked outside. Chu Moran hadn't come back yet. Armed with a sleeping gas bomb, she quietly left the room.

Chapter 10

The insects had long gone into hibernation for it already was a winter's night. A curved moon hung in the sky, emitting a cold, pale light.

She huffed while walking towards the underground dungeon.

Due to her keen observation for the last few days, she noticed that breaking through the security was relatively easy. While Pingting walked, she saw a couple of maids, who waved and then scurried off.

Around the artificial mountain and bamboo she went, arriving at the entrance of the underground dungeon.

The warden had seen someone approaching in the distance but he was surprised to see that it was Pingting. He greeted her with a smile.

“Why has Miss Yangfeng decide to pay us a visit? Wow, it sure is cold today.”

“I lost a hairpin, just have to look for it”

“A hairpin?” The warden hesitated, “Couldn't you have left it in your room?”

“I've looked, but it's not in there. I think it's more likely that I lost it in the dungeon.” Pingting lowered her voice, “I only got it from Duke this morning and I've only used it once. How am I supposed to explain to Duke tomorrow morning? Please, please help me look for it”

“That's...” The warden looked undecided. “This dungeon is an important place, it is usually prohibited to

enter.”

“Didn't I go in this morning?”

The warden's mouth tightened into a thin line but he pretended to be cheerful. “Miss, aren't you bending my values here? If Duke asks...”

Pingting took her argument no further, instead pretended to be elegant. “Then could you please go in and have a look for me? Look carefully on the ground and on the stage. I'll wait here.” She immediately started coughing, pretending to be sick from the cold.

The north wind was piercing. Even the warden had been cold, but now hearing Pingting's cough unnerved him. “Miss, please go back. When I find it, I shall personally deliver it to you.”

“No, no, waiting is better. Cough, cough, cough...cough...I...cough...my chest feels humid, my forehead feels like it's on fire, but I don't feel cold.”

Her words made a startling impact on the dungeon keeper.

The dungeon keeper knew that the Duke adored this girl. For her sickness, he had chosen the famous doctor, Chen Guangzhi, to look after her. It was very likely that she would be his future, official wife, their Duchess. If she got sick outside his dungeon, then...

After weighing his options, the dungeon head said, through gritted teeth, “On other thoughts, you can come in. It's slightly warmer in there. It'll be more convincing if you look for it yourself too, Miss.”

He opened the big dungeon door, let Pingting in and gingerly closed the door behind her.

At the other end of the once pitch-black room, there lay Dongzhuo.

He didn't feel cold. The dried blood that covered his body felt like a thousand infernos. It clung to his body, even the slightest movement could tear open his wounds.

He rested against the wall, trying to save as much strength as possible.

Creak...

The sound of the dungeon door carefully being opened broke the silence. A ray of light entered.

Dongzhuo's eyes flickered in response.

“Dongzhuo?” Pingting appeared at the door, holding a flaming torch.

Dongzhuo's mouth twitched into a smile, forcing a hint of his usual mischievous demeanour. “I was waiting for you.”

He stood up, his wounds on his legs threatened to give in.

Pingting's face flashed towards him, smiling, and the chains rattled.

After his binds had been taken off, Dongzhuo asked, "What happened to the people outside?"

"Down." Pingting rolled her crystal black eyes. "I didn't even use the sleeping gas bomb."

"You mean the formula that almost forced the entire Residence of Jing-An to sleep?"

Pingting lifted the corners of her mouth smugly. "Follow me."

They left the dungeon, the warden and his three guards lay on the ground outside. Both of them had been to too many wars and they efficiently changed into the residential guards' clothes without a word. Pingting knew the place too well and led the way to the stables.

The sky had yet to brighten and the stable boy was still fast asleep.

Dongzhuo chose two of the best horses. One for Pingting, the other for himself.

"Looks like Chu Beijie isn't back yet, thank God." Pingting looked up at the sky. "At this time, Mr Zhang will be guarding the back door. He isn't very strong, so go easy on him."

After they had knocked out Mr Zhang, out the little back door they went. Just like that, they had escaped from the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence, without too much trouble.

They smiled at each other, no need for celebration.

Besides, the further they went, the safer.

Soon, they had left the city walls, galloping past the fields of yellow grass and nectarine trees.

Thinking that they had already left the danger behind, they slowed down a little.

Both of them were tired, so they chose a spot and sat down to have a rest.

Dongzhuo lowered his head, deep in thought. He couldn't help but ask, "It might be better to ask this question in the future, but... Pingting, how did you end up in Chu Beijie's residence?"

The smile on Pingting's face faltered for a second, but it was quickly replaced by the normal expression. "Come closer. Let me tell you."

Dongzhuo leaned closer to her and Pingting whispered into his ear. What he heard made his face change and after she had finished, she jerked his head upwards to stare at Pingting.

Pingting kept her face neutral, "What?"

"So that's the story..."

"Anyways, back to the point." Pingting said, "The residence lost a criminal. Chu Beijie will definitely send

soldiers to pursue us. One of us needs to divert the soldiers' attention, the other needs to go back to Master.”

“Pingting, I think we should give up.”

Her face went cold, “How can we possibly just give up now? I'll go east and you go west. Go.”

He didn't reply, so Pingting pushed him onto a horse and whipped it. She watched the horse slowly disappear into the distance.

“Pingting can finally see you again, Master.” She checked that Dongzhuo really had disappeared, before heading to her destination.

Pingting had been right, it was going to snow soon. In the early morning, the sun briefly showed its face before darting back into the clouds and very soon, grey clouds began to cover the sky.

Pingting, who was still on horse, knew that the clouds overhead were gathering.

“Ah, that's a big snowflake.” She reached out, picking out a snowflake in midair. She watched it melt on her frozen, red hand and this brought a child-like smile onto her face.

She hadn't seen such good snow for a long time.

For the last couple of years, her master always called out to her around this time. “Hurry! Time to admire the snow, don't forget the qin, remember to bring the qin.”

Though Master is in hiding, he should be happy with this snow too, right?

She wasn't riding that fast, but was casually appreciating the spiralling white scenery. She'd already taken off the white fox coat off the horse and had draped it over herself.

Chu Beijie had given her that coat recently. It seemed that it was a specialty of Dong Lin. It really was nice to wear, for it seemed that not the slightest bit of wind could penetrate through. As she had expected there to be snow, she had come well-prepared.

“When there is trouble, there are heroes; when there are heroes, there are beautiful women; surviving the turmoil, surviving the turmoil...”

Though it was cold, Pingting was in a good mood and amidst the beautiful scenery, she had begun to sing.

Her mind was occupied and despite the smile on her face, there was an unmistakable trace of confusion.

But her voice was as gentle as ever.

“If there are soldiers, there will be fame; if there is fame, there will be fraud; soldiers know fraud, soldiers know fraud...”

She suddenly thought of Chu Beijie.

Her face suddenly went red, as if she had just brushed blusher on her cheeks.

That person, that man. Pingting stopped singing, softly sighing. No word could even describe him.

It snowed heavily for the next three days, while she continued to ride East.

Three days later, the snow stopped. She had already reached the outskirts of Dong Lin. She stopped at a place exactly a day away from Gui Le.

The earth was white.

Pingting stopped and asked a passer-by for the first time.

“Excuse me Sir, do you know where Three-Swallow Cliff is?”

“Straight ahead. Can you see that strip of land where those sheep are grazing on? Go through there and at the fork, go right. You'll get there in about half a day by horse.” The old man was holding preserved foods for the winter. He looked up, “It's so cold, yet you still have to go?”

“Yep!” She thanked the old man, then mumbled, “Sheep on a strip of land...”

It was right ahead.

She thought of her master's smile and wondered how he would react when he saw her.

She couldn't suppress the joy in her heart; she pushed the horse to go a little faster.

Arriving at the thin strip of grass, she saw that her path was a valley wide enough for three horses to pass through simultaneously, but the sky up ahead was still a relatively thin gap.

Grey-white light shone through the gap.

Pingting stopped at the entrance.

The wind that came from the valley was bitter, bone-piercingly cold. The cold matched the sound of crunching gravel.

The air was like a morbid omen.

“Pursuers...” Pingting's delicate mouth sighed, as if to feel the danger. Pingting suddenly jerked her horse and whipped it, hard.

“Go!”

The little black horse seemed to have also felt the danger. It reared up, before bounding into the valley.

Then came their eerie predators.

They could hear the rumbling of hooves behind them. Figures suddenly appeared, like demons arising from the earth.

Pursuing soldiers, pursuing soldiers!

The Duke of Zhen-Bei's soldiers were here!

It was like they were trying to overpower the white earth.

They were getting closer and closer, it was almost deafening. It was difficult not to imagine that murderous intent in the air, with soldiers and their swords flashing in silver light.

Pingting didn't look back, just galloped forward.

Something roared within her, but it was immediately replaced by dismay.

“Yangfeng!” Came the rich voice, sweet to her ears.

Chu Beijie was here.

Her slender body trembled, but Pingting pretended not to hear, she continued to gallop forward.

Faster, faster! The wind whipped against her face, it hurts.

“Bai Pingting!” The same voice, except this time it was adorned with anger.

Pingting was shaking.

She knew this person's sweet voice very well.

He said that they will never be apart.

He said that when spring came, he would personally pick a flower for her every day.

But now he was angry, like the lions, who sought blood.

All she could picture was a battlefield. When a powerful army strikes to defeat an enemy, the blood thirsty cry like demons commanding a massacre.

The hooves seemed to get closer, as if they were right behind her.

She tried her best to speed up by using the whip again.

But before the whip had actually gone down, someone had already pulled the whip out of her hands and had wrapped his arms around her waist, as if trying to prove some point.

“Ah!” She exclaimed as she fell into an embrace that smelled of gunpowder.

Opening her eyes, she saw a pair of very dangerous looking black pupils.

“You sure ran away far.” He used one hand to guide the horse, the other to hold his captive. Chu Beijie forced a smile, “Look at you, so disobedient, escaping this far.”

Despite knowing the danger, Pingting had to ask him something. “When did you realize I was Bai Pingting?”

“All right, not too late.” He peered down at her, as if calculating her.

Slender neck, white hands, delicate face.

Her eyes were too calm. She certainly didn't know what real torture was, nor did she know how dangerous the angry Duke of Zhen-Bei was like.

How am I going to punish her?

“Where's Dongzhuo?” she gave up struggling because she knew that it was impossible to escape from his arms.

“Ran away. Don't worry, I'll capture him soon and then you'll be able to have a happy reunion.” Chu Beijie coldly replied, “Three-Swallow Cliff, was it?”

Pingting began to chuckle.

Chu Beijie sweetened his voice, “I'm more afraid of you crying though. Your tears totally break my heart.”

Pingting stopped laughing. “Duke must have pretty reliable sources.”

“That's right.”

“You were suspicious of my identity from the start. You caught someone from the Jing-An Ducal Residence to test me”

“You could be right. If you let me kill that brat, then I wouldn't have been suspicious of you anymore.”

“Duke pretended to go away on purpose, but you secretly followed us after I had rescued him. You did this to find Master's location.”

Chu Beijie looked at her bemused. “An army has already gathered at Three-Swallow Cliff, so your stalling techniques are useless.”

“Duke's embrace is always the warmest.” Pingting seemed to have given up, she had closed her eyes and was obediently pressing into Chu Beijie. “If Duke is so strong, how come you didn't catch Dongzhuo?”

Pingting's voice must have made Chu Beijie think of something else, as he shouted, “Retreat! Retreat out of this place!”

Pingting smiled tenderly, “Too late.”

Everyone’s face looked dumb-stricken.

They had yet to understand, when they heard shouts overhead. They looked up, seeing many bows and arrows pointing at them from both sides.

With this many arrows, even the most skilled would have difficulty escaping.

“It’s an ambush!”

“Ah! The people of the Jing-An Ducal Residence!”

“Damn it! Run! Ah...”

The crowd roared as many tried to escape with their horses, but the unforgiving arrows still penetrated right through their stomachs.

They kept screaming, as did people falling off their horse.

The horses neighed as the blood splattered everywhere.

The arrows only came for the ones who tried to escape. Some of the people on the cliff shouted, “Those who surrender will not be killed! Those who surrender will not be killed!”

It was pretty obvious that the victor had been decided already.

Chu Beijie knew that he had been too careless and this would leave a lasting stain on his profile. He raised his hand and shouted, “Stop moving. Everyone dismount and hold onto your horse.”

He repeated his command twice more and his soldiers had calmed down. As expected, they dismounted and they had all gathered around him. His army wielded swords of all kinds, their blade flashing in the light.

He looked down and saw a pair of cunning eyes.

“So you deliberately chose a place to leave that brat, and those whisperings were actually your plan to trap me.”

“You flatter me, Duke. That place was quite difficult to find and making Dongzhuo disappear from your spies took me a lot of thought.”

Her slow journey through the snow was also a ploy to give Dongzhuo enough time to report back to her master. Fortunately she read a lot and had recently read about this valley on the outskirts of Dong Lin. It had helped with her planning.

Chu Beijie thought about what she said. “Unfortunately, you miscalculated one thing.”

“Oh?”

“If you hadn't miscalculated, why did you end up in my hands?” After a while, he added, “If a thousand arrows head for me, although I won't live for long, I doubt you would.”

Pingting raised an eyebrow and in a light voice she said, “I sold you. So does it matter whether I accompany you to death or not?”

Chu Beijie's sharp eyes rested on her hair, threatening to pierce through her skull. “It was a rhetorical question, besides, I doubt you want to die.”

Pingting answered, “Duke is such a hero, so of course you wouldn't like to die useless? Actually, I don't exactly want Duke's death, but you have to promise one thing. One thing and those bows and arrows will disappear, without hurting anyone.

“Speak.”

“It's simple, for the next five years, Dong Lin's soldiers cannot enter nor fight Gui Le.”

Chu Beijie lowered his voice, “Only the King can make decisions on battles.”

“Duke is the brother of the King and you are also the best general, so you must have some influence right? Gui Le gets five years of peace in exchange for Duke's life, I think that's fair.” She bit her lip and lowered her voice too, “If you live, I live. If you die, I can only accompany you to death.”

Chu Beijie realized that he was holding onto a very cunning woman, yet his heart refused to give in.

Gentle, he could still remember her lingering touch.

She could be gentle, but underneath was immeasurable deception, trickery.

Chu Beijie gritted his teeth, the veins in his neck were emphasized.

He had never been manipulated by anyone.

This was an absolutely unforgivable insult.

Pingting didn't realise Chu Beijie's anger.

Her heart tangled up at the sight of Chu Beijie's face.

She could no longer tolerate his oppressive gaze, so she softly urged, “Duke, you must make your decision now.”

His thoughts were blank.

“Ha, ha, hahahaha!” Chu Beijie tossed his head back and laughed, his spectators wondering if he had gone crazy. He stared angrily at Pingting, his eyes full of hatred. “Do as you wish.”

Pulling out his most important sword that hung from his waist, he threw it towards the ground, the force strong enough to light a fire.

“I, Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei, Chu Beijie, swear on my royal blood that for the next five years, no Dong Lin soldier will set foot on Gui Le territory. I leave this sword to you, as a token of my promise.”

His resentful voice echoed in the valley, like a deep sorrowful lament at the end of time. His voice was clear and loud. As soon as Chu Beijie said this, a figure appeared at the top of the cliff, peering down but smiling. “The Duke of Zhen-Bei is a true gentleman. I, He Xia, believe you will keep your promise and on behalf of all those peasants who do not wish to fight, I would like to thank you.

There he was, the Marquess of Jing-An, graceful but not showy, wearing clothes as white as the snow. He was the very person that the King of Gui Le wanted to kill most at the moment.

Pingting saw her master and couldn't help but exclaim “Master!” in delight.

He Xia turned towards her and nodded. “Pingting, you did well, I.....” his words were caught in his throat, as if it was too private to talk about. He turned to Chu Beijie, “Please let go of my maid. Now that the deal has been made, the Duke of Zhen-Bei, you may leave. We will not attack you.”

Chu Beijie didn't say a word, just glanced down at Pingting.

Go back?

Letting go, he helped her off the horse. It was a simple action, but Chu Beijie could not stop himself from holding onto her tighter and tighter.

This extremely slim woman, who was as poisonous as snakes and scorpions and would manipulate him without a second thought. She should be his enemy, one that he should quickly kill.

Yet he was almost clutching onto her.

Don't want to... let go.

Her warm body, her slender fingertips and her delicate face was frozen from the cold.

His fingers brushed against her lips.

Like he used to.

He had gotten used to listening her play the qin, used to listening her joke about the weather, used to her lazing on the bed all night while he read his documents.

If only he had known her true origin, he could have prevented this from happening and live with her in peace.

His happiness only took him into a trap.

What he thought he had captured suddenly grew wings and flew away, back to her master.

Yet he could not stand the thought of letting her go.

He was used to holding her, hugging her, kissing her. Kissing her...

His hatred was extreme, his love thinning out.

He was used to.....

Between earth and heaven, this woman must be the most evil and the most hated person ever, yet between earth and heaven, she was also the softest, the gentlest.

And he struggled to catch this extraordinary woman.

Chu Beijie shut his eyes, thinking, preserving.

"Duke, please let go of my maid," Came the faint voice of He Xia.

Chu Beijie seemed to fall the cloud of the past back into reality. He looked down, she was still there, staring at him with her bright eyes.

"Duke, please let me dismount," she whispered.

Chu Beijie wasn't sure that he heard her correctly.

Dismount? Where are you going?

You lied to me, why should I just let you go because you say so?

In this entire world, I only want you, only you.

My hatred is strong yet my love is deep. I want your body and mind; there is no escape.

Chu Beijie frostily replied, "I only promised Gui Le five years of peace, I did not promise to give you up."

Pingting shook her head and said, "My country's soldiers haven't retreated yet. It's not looking too good for you, Duke."

"As expected of He Xia's female military advisor." Chu Beijie's lips were drawn tight, but then he smiled, "What do you think will happen if I kill you here and now?"

Pingting wasn't afraid at all, she sweetly laughed instead, "Pingting will die with Duke on the same day and at the same time."

"Wrong." Chu Beijie relaxed, before saying, "He Xia won't allow anyone to shoot me. He will let me leave here safely, so long I promise to uphold my promise of peace."

Uncertainty flicked on Pingting's face, though it was instantaneously back to normal. It however, did not escape Chu Beijie's sharp eyes.

Chu Beijie exclaimed, "You are He Xia's personal maid, yet you don't know that he is a famous general? What is famous, you say; it is distinguishing what's important and what's not. The life of Bai Pingting is insignificant in comparison to five years of peace."

Pingting hesitated for a while, before sadly saying, "Duke, do you really hate me that much?"

Chu Beijie gazed at her with a profound expression, not saying a word.

Pingting gave a wan smile. "Fine. Kill me."

As soon as she said this, her feet landed on the ground with a soft thud. Then she looked up, seeing the man so familiar yet imposing.

"This is your final chance." Chu Beijie sighed, "Get on the horse with me and say good bye to He Xia. From then on, you will no longer be called Bai Pingting, you will be Chu."

His words jolted through Pingting, because despite the treachery she had done, he had still left her a chance. *How could I not feel grateful?*

His crystal eyes stared into hers, whispering of their overwhelming love.

The Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence's guqin.

The flower had disappeared, to a place no one knew.

I am the soul that meanders through the snow-white plains, you are the world's sharpest blade. Between us, lies a mountain of hatred and betrayal.

High mountains, surrounded by snow. You cannot see me, I cannot see you.

A wrenching heart, never ceasing.

Pingting gazed into the distance where she could see He Xia waiting. She bit her lip hard, took a step backwards before saying, "Please leave Duke, Pingting cannot send you off."

Chu Beijie's face was expressionless, drained of warmth. He nodded.

"Well, well, well....." He said then coldly added, "One day, I'll let you know what excruciating heartache is." With that, he turned away, bringing his whip down hard on his horse.

The horse cried loudly before rushing out, leaving a cloud of dust behind.

A lonely figure heading towards the setting sun.

Chapter 11

Winter went, and spring came.

The flowers were blooming while butterflies flew, sometimes they even perched on a finger.

In a huge villa located near the borders of Gui Le and Bei Mo, Pingting stared listlessly into space.

“You've gotten thin these days,” He Xia stood behind her, sighing. “Pingting, you've changed.”

“Changed?” Pingting chuckled, flicked her finger and the butterfly flew off. She looked up, “Who has changed? Pingting's surname is still Bai, still owned by Master, still plays qin for Master everyday.”

He Xia studied her, until she was unable to meet his eyes. Then he suddenly turned and got something behind him. “For you.”

“What?” Pingting looked at it carefully, apparently it was a sword given by Chu Beijie as a token of truce. “This is a symbol of truce between two countries. You can't just give it to me.”

“Chu Beijie has a certain habit, at every battle, he always has a sword on his right and left. This token is the sword on his left.” He Xia paused, lowered his voice and said, “This sword is known as 'Departed Soul'.”

Pingting's eyes swivelled towards the centuries-old sword, stretched out a hand and slowly stroked it, repeating, “Departed Soul?”

“Back then I didn't understand why he left the most important left sword, instead of his right sword, 'Divine'. But now I get it. He left this sword for you, since your soul has departed from this world.” He Xia stuffed the sword into Pingting's hands, sighed again, then walked out of the room.

Departed Soul?

Pingting hugged the sword, the cold scabbard pressed against her skin.

She stared into space.

That's right, her soul had disappeared while the figure disappeared on that horse.

How could I forget Chu Beijie? It was spring, the best time to admire flowers.

After everything had settled down, she spent her days and nights, carefully and precisely, thinking about Chu Beijie.

Why her heart had become mud then gradually melting into water, she did not know. She could not remember the frauds, the plotting, nor the leading to Chu Beijie's defeat. She could only think of those three nights at Hua Residence, that time when his face was so sincere while he quietly stood vigil.

“What kind of person are you?” Pingting lifted her head, looking up at the clouds. “Do you hate me, or do you love me? Before your departure, did you pretend to be dismayed, or did you lie to me?”

He was gentle, day and night. That was true.

His deception and lies, they weren't untrue either.

She was extremely clever, but she was extremely confused at the moment as if she were stuck in quicksand, unable to pull herself up.

Feeling a sudden heavy pain on her shoulder, Pingting turned abruptly, startled.

“Haha, daydreaming again?” Dongzhuo pretended to grimace, but seeing Pingting's pale face, he stopped himself to laugh instead. “Eh, eh? Why're you crying?”

Pingting hastily wiped her eyes, glared and said, “You're never serious. You finally decided to change your habits after that incident, but a couple of days later, your cheeky habits are back again.”

Dongzhuo scratched his head, glanced at her, sat down and lifted a tea cup. “I came to see you and cheer you up. Instead you scowled at me, trying to tell me off or something.”

Pingting felt bad when she heard this. She lowered her head and mumbled, “You don't need to worry about me, I'm perfectly healthy, and I'll be all right in a couple of days.”

“A couple of days? We're leaving today, so lighten up.”

“Today?” Pingting hesitated, “Where are we going?”

Dongzhuo looked stunned, like he had expected that Pingting knew all along. Something unnatural flashed on his face, but it disappeared as soon as it came. He blinked, “I only vaguely heard Master say it twice, something like... *‘Although this place has been the secret hideout of our Residence for several years, it is still within Gui Le territory. The King is still searching for us, so it's best to leave as soon as possible...’* I don't know where we're going though.” He scratched his head in concentration, “Master asked me to do something by the way. I haven't done it yet.”

Pingting watched Dongzhuo leave in a hurry, looking away long after he had gone.

Her master and Dongzhuo weren't to blame for the propaganda in Gui Le.

Ever since returning to her Master's side, she was like a lost soul. Others would say ten sentences whereas she would awkwardly say one sentence.

She used to partially manage the household work, but ever since falling into the hands of Dong Lin, her work had been distributed among some other maids. Her return did not affect daily life.

Just like that, life continued on.

Her master was right, though the location was fairly discrete, it was still a place where the King could move freely and so preparations must be made early. In the past, she would have realized it early on and told her master, but now... had she also lost her intelligence?

As expected, a maid came to pack her clothes up that day.

Pingting asked, "Where are we going?"

"I don't know."

"Where's Master?"

"Master is busy."

She followed her Residence's people onto a carriage when she realized that she couldn't see Dongzhuo either. "Where's Dongzhuo?"

"How am I supposed to know that? Sis Pingting, don't worry about it and sit calmly for the journey."

"Which carriage is Master on? I always sit on the same carriage with him."

"Sis Pingting, Master wants you to sit on the carriage with us and I don't know where Master is."

Only one answer could be given to every ten questions, the journey passed by without incident until they arrived at another residence. It seemed to have been secretly prepared by House of Jing-An several years ago.

Suspicious, Pingting couldn't help but forget about Chu Beijie, studying her surroundings instead.

Her uneasiness increased.

She hadn't seen her master yet and she hadn't realized what was happening before, but now she did.

"Where's Sir, the Duke?"

"The Duke doesn't know that we're here yet."

"Where is this?"

"I don't know."

Realizing that the maid really knew nothing, she tried to go outside to find her master, but she was blocked outside. "I'd like to see Master, please let me go."

To which she received blank stares, "Master is away, he will find Sis when he comes back."

She didn't see He Xia for the next couple of days and she received little news. Pingting couldn't see her surroundings, beside or in front. Everything was blurry.

She couldn't help feeling chilled. How could things have changed so much in such a short period of time?

Was the Residence changing or was she?

Soon her sickness from last year returned.

Pingting woke up in the middle of the night, coughing. She sent for a doctor and he was busy all night.

He Xia finally re-appeared that day.

“Why are you sick again?” He Xia frowned, accusingly saying, “You never look after yourself properly. See, you've wrecked your body again. What's the point?” He personally brought and spooned the medicine to her.

Pingting stared at He Xia then broke into a smile. “Master sure is busy these days, I don't even get to see you anymore.”

“I'm afraid that I'll upset you. I'm afraid that you'll work too hard, so I've hidden everything that'll upset you and make you overwork.”

“About the future of the Royal House and ours, have you discussed it with the Duke here?”

“See, see. I told you I always make you worry. I'll organise everything.”

Pingting propped herself up to drink the medicine, and she closed her eyes. He Xia didn't leave in a hurry. He sat beside her instead, gently rubbing her shoulder. “Go to sleep, you're as thin as bone. More food and sleep will do you well. You're so quiet these days, but it reminds me of the time when we were younger and you used to throw plates into the well.”

“Being young and innocent is so nice.”

“We're still good.”

A smile spread across Pingting's thin face, when she suddenly thought of something. “Master, Chu Beijie once told me something.”

“What did he say?”

“He said I am He Xia's maid yet I didn't know that he was a famous general. What is famous, you say? It is distinguishing between what's important and what's not. The life of Bai Pingting is...insignificant in comparison to five years of peace.”

He Xia shook his head, “Stupid girl. You believed his words all along?”

“He may be an enemy general, but I do believe in his words.” Pingting looked tenderly at He Xia's face, whispering “Master is a famous general.”

He Xia didn't answer.

“Pingting, ever since coming back, you've never told me anything about the Duke of Zhen-Bei.”

“Chu Beijie was suspicious of me from the start; though I was often in the room while he read official documents, I couldn't read a single word on them.”

There was no point in dwelling over the past.

Just like the shabby walls of the Gui Le's once-beautiful Jing-An Ducal Residence.

Defeat lay ahead, so how could one's virtues not change?

“Gui Le now has five years of peace, during these five years, the King can form a stronger army to fight against Dong Lin. Every step we take, are worthy to our country. No matter what He Su says, he is Gui Le's King, if he doesn't like us, we can't do anything about it. From now on, House of Jing-An no longer exists, for we are going to retreat into the mountains and never appear in public again.” He Xia paused, then added, “But the problem is that House of Jing-An has many adversaries. Many people would love to kill us, including our King. Therefore, our secrecy will rely on one thing, that is, our location.”

A bone-piercing wind chilled her heart like a rope had suddenly ended her life.

“Master...” Pingting gritted her teeth, finally managing to say, “You're suspicious of me?”

“You plotted against Chu Beijie and gained valuable time for Gui Le. You are good person. I believe in you.” He Xia raised his head, closing his eyes. Then he opened his eyes and asked softly, “But Pingting, do you believe in yourself?”

Those seven words shocked her.

Pingting was completely shocked. Pain and disbelief was written all over her face.

“What are you saying?” Pingting choked out, after her voice had returned.

He Xia didn't answer her question, “What are you clutching onto?”

“Departed Soul,” Pingting replied, “You gave it to me.”

“No, Chu Beijie gave you that.” He Xia sighed, “If you had rejected Departed Soul last time, I would have had the slightest trace of hope. I hoped that you wouldn't have lost your soul and reason to Chu Beijie. But you accepted it. You only thought of Chu Beijie, forgetting Gui Le. When you accepted Departed Soul, did you ever think that it was only for the symbol of peace between two countries for all the peasants?”

“If I had forgotten about Gui Le, would I have lead Chu Beijie into a trap?”

He Xia looked at her, “An unstable love born amidst danger. Only when they part, do they realise the depth of their love.”

“No...”

“Pingting, ever since you came back, you're always refusing to sit on the same carriage as me. We were always as close as siblings before this. That day, he tried to help you, a woman, down the horse, well, not

many men can do that..."

"Don't say anymore, don't say anymore!" Pingting shook her head, a lump in her throat. She closed her eyes, a shiny tear caught in her eyelashes. "I understand."

Backfired plotting.

It was true that she tricked Chu Beijie, yet Chu Beijie used his true feelings to trick her.

Love was true, the deception was true too.

Being with her Master in the Jing-An Ducal Residence for the last eighteen years was nothing compared to Chu Beijie's simple trick.

For the first time in her life, Pingting realised how helplessly she had fallen into his trap. She could no longer get He Xia's complete trust, because the truth was, she really had fallen in love.

In this world, those who have fallen in love cannot make clear judgements.

If she were to meet Chu Beijie in the future, her actions would be completely unpredictable.

He Xia being suspicious of her was perfectly excusable.

Completely natural.

That was Chu Beijie's final trick, to make her heart ache.

Eyes wide open until sunrise, hearing the rooster crow, Pingting abruptly sat up on her bed. She groped around a bit, like she had lost her mind, until her hands finally traced the familiar patterns on the scabbard.

'Departed' and 'Soul', were the two ancient characters engraved onto it.

She thought back to the time when Chu Beijie had thrown down his sword, eyes flashing with anger and then back to what He Xia had just told her.

If she hadn't accepted it, there would still have been hope.

Yet if she did...

Eighteen years of service cleanly wiped away by a single sword.

She did not usually like to cry, but today she had more tears than ever. Her heart was like frozen water. She wanted to cry, but she couldn't.

Stiffly sitting in bed, she felt her thoughts muddle up. She rubbed her forehead.

She realised that her high temperature had returned as she pressed her cold fingertips against her burning forehead.

A maid called Lingdang, sent by He Xia, came in, carefully asking, “Sis, it's time to get up?”

She repeated the question three times until Pingting snapped back into focus, “Eh?”

Lingdang brought in some hot water, squeezed a cloth dry and gave it to Pingting. They were always moving around and everything was scattered around the room. Lingdang searched around for the brush Pingting usually used.

Pingting, who was standing behind her, said, “Don't bother. Find Dongzhuo for me.”

“Dongzhuo?”

“He's not here?”

Lingdang shook her head, smiling. “I'll check.”

The sun was bright, the scent of spring was getting stronger and stronger. The door bead curtain tinkled at Lingdang's departure, glittering in the sunlight. At that moment, Pingting remembered the blinds at Hua Residence.

She and Lady Hua hid behind blinds, secretly peering at their guests.

That, was the time she first saw Chu Beijie.

Being the only one in the room made it feel cold, so cold that even Pingting couldn't think too much about the past. After getting out of bed and finding her brush, she slowly brushed her long black hair beside the window, keeping her eyes on the vibrant colours of the outside world.

Red and purple flowers were half open. Lush green grass grew beside the pond. Though it was beautiful, everything was unfamiliar.

It was not the Jing-An Ducal Residence nor Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence.

“Get on the horse with me and say good bye to He Xia. From then on, you will no longer be called Bai Pingting, you will be Chu.”

“You only thought of Chu Beijie; you forgot about Gui Le. When you accepted Departed Soul, did you ever think that it was only for the symbol of peace between two countries, for all the peasants?”

She frowned, like she really wanted to end her life as soon as possible, her hands were clutched tightly to her chest while she looked back at the precious sword beside her bed.

Departed Soul.

She left Chu Beijie, but she could no longer return to the Jing-An Ducal Residence. How did she, Bai Pingting, who was the most trusted maid of the Marquess of Jing-An, the experienced female military advisor, the girl who gained five years of peace for Gui Le, end up being a lonely spirit?

“Pingting,” came Dongzhuo's voice somewhere behind her, “You were looking for me?”

Pingting put down her brush, turned around, her lips already forming a smile. “I want to tell you something.”

Dongzhuo looked a bit startled, he hadn't seen Pingting for several days. He had been busy, but he still knew that something was worrying her. Seeing his friend so distraught made his playful smile disappear, replaced by a more serious, adult-like face. He lowered his head, “Tell me.”

“I'm leaving.”

Dongzhuo's heart sank at these two words.

“Leaving?” He jerked his head up, drilling into Pingting's black eyes. He forgot about all of his previous problems. He seemed to jolt up, pushing down the words he really wanted to say. Then he asked awkwardly, “Does Master know?”

Pingting chuckled softly, leaned against the windowsill, waving her hand. “Dongzhuo, come closer.” Clutching onto Dongzhuo's hand, she carefully thought through what she was going to say. “Geez, you always call me Pingting this, Pingting that, but I'm actually older than you by a couple of months. You should be calling me 'Sis'.”

Dongzhuo was so upset that he forcibly mumbled “Sis” through gritted teeth.

“Good boy,” Pingting actually did pretend to act like an older sister, lecturing. “The hardest thing for people to do is to know when to attack and when to retreat. That day, I attacked Chu Beijie. But today, it is time for me to retreat.”

“But you are a person of the Jing-An Ducal Residence, besides, where can you go? The King is attacking all the people serving the House of Jing-An, you included, and Chu Beijie will definitely hunt for you.”

“I have my own plans.”

Dongzhuo's pent-up frustration finally exploded, “I know Master's suspicious of you. I'll tell Master that you're a good person.”

“You mustn't go.”

“I can't stand it, Master's the one at fault here. If he stays like this, he'll be just as bad as our King, right?”

“Stop!” Pingting grabbed him, emphasising every word. “Master has the right to be suspicious.”

Dongzhuo stopped immediately, frowning. “What? I don't think you have loyalties outside of our residence”

Pingting looked startled for a moment, but then she sighed. “You won't understand even if I tell you. Anyway, when I'm gone, say that my leaving is for the best. For the entire residence, for Master and for me.

Master is in a tight spot at the moment, yet I cannot help him nor can I upset him.”

“How can you upset Master?”

“Dongzhuo...” Pingting looked at him tenderly, but with a bitter smile, “Think of it like this. Master cannot neglect me due to my service but cannot relax around me due to my suspicious actions. He doesn't dare to look after, harm or make me sad. Sigh, I feel really sorry for Master.”

“But if you go.....”

“When I leave, I will no longer be connected to the Residence. I wouldn't be able to tell you anything, even if I wanted to.”

Dongzhuo was still shaking his head, “No. If you're like that, aren't you ungrateful to Master and abusing your authority?”

Pingting's shiny eyes flashed, “That's why I need your help. I need to leave without Master's knowing.”

“No, no, no, I can't hide anything from Master.”

“Of course not, but Master will lie to you. Let's bet, if he knows what we're planning, he will not only not announce it but secretly organise my escape.”

“I just don't understand you!” Dongzhuo scratched his head, anxiously pacing up and down the room. Then he jerked towards Pingting, “its fine if I help you. Whether Master is at fault or not, all I know is that you were the unlucky one and I know that you will never betray our Residence. But...where could you go? Don't forget that you're sick and that it has only been two days since...”

Pingting interrupted, “No, I'm leaving tonight.”

Her tone was soft, but Dongzhuo could hear unwavering decisiveness in it. He raised an eyebrow, “If you don't tell me where you're going, I refuse to help you. You'll be outside alone and if something happens to you, I'll never have another night of sleep.” His hands were clutched at his chest and he was facing Pingting.

“After leaving here, I will be free so I can go anywhere I want easily. You know that a lot of people are searching for me and did you really think I'd tell such a carefree guy like you? But the direction I plan to go is...” Pingting whispered in his ear, “north.”

Did spring arrive later in the north?

Back in the days while she lived in the Royal Residence, her good friend Yangfeng once said that her dream place was the endless grasslands of the north, where thousands of cattle, sheep and horses grazed upon. Occasionally one would break into a gallop and the other horses would follow, eventually increasing into an ear-splitting sound, like the earth being torn apart.

She couldn't stay in Gui Le, while Dong Lin was even more dangerous than a dragon's cave and a tiger's den.

Why not Bei Mo?

In the distance, the red sun had yet to rise. Pingting took a deep breath of the fresh morning air. She had been resting for too long that even her bones felt cranky. The place where she had been living was hidden in a valley and had little sun. Whenever she went outside, she suddenly felt a nostalgic feeling as she stared up at the broad expanse of sky. She forgot about everything as she thought about galloping away to find her friend in Bei Mo.

Yangfeng's smile should be more radiant than ever.

Translation Notes

- Autumn tiger was quite fierce (03): Autumn was still quite warm.
- Bei Mo (11): Bei Mo is another one of the four countries (the other one is Yun Chang). Bei Mo literally means “desert in the north”.
- Black eyes (06): In some parts of China, it’s considered that the darker they are, the better one looks. But usually it’s just a ‘very dark brown’ that is similar to the pupils in shade. Elegant Destroyer (proofreader/assistant) supposes it’s rather like obsidian because it’s so dark it reflects tiny bits of colour.
- Bowing (06): Kowtow bowing if you like. It’s basically kneeling and bowing so low that your head touches the ground.
- Coins (01): Money. In the actual novel, the type of money (dollars, cents) is unknown.
- Desperate measure (07): When there’s nothing you can do but hurt yourself, to earn other people’s sympathy, in order to get what you want.
- East & West (10): Dong Lin literally means “east forest”. So when Pingting and Dongzhuo escape from Dong Lin, they go west. Dong Lin lies to the west of Gui Le.
- Fake mountain (05): Large decorative objects often found in large residences. They usually aren’t safe to climb...
- Glowing pearl (05): This is a legendary pearl that glows. There other names, such as “luminous pearl” and “pearl that glows in the night.” It’s often depicted to be green though probably not in this case.
- King’s Order (04): When the King can’t say something personally, he gets someone to write up a “King’s Order” on a piece of yellow cloth. A messenger takes it and reads it out to the recipient(s) on behalf of the King. The recipient(s) of the Order must obey whatever is written on it, or he/she may be punished for treason.
- Marriage (06): In China, traditional clothes are usually red. This includes most orient countries, such as India and Pakistan.
- Music critic (03): This is one of the double/triple meaning words. In this case, it most likely means music critic, but the deeper meanings, “soul mate” (friend) and “soul mate” (lover), could also apply. I translated the manhua’s version as “soul mate” but that was probably a mistranslation. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Pingting thinks Chu Beijie is so cocky.
- qin (02): A traditional Chinese instrument. Do not confuse with “zheng”. Sometimes there are “guqin” references. “Gu” means old/ancient, so “guqin” means “ancient qin”. However, this is far too long to write in most cases, so it has been left untranslated.
- Real man (06): It’s said that men are best when they’re gentlemen (polite etc.), well-educated and strong.
- Residence (01): In a residence, there are many buildings, therefore the word “house” cannot correctly portray the place. These buildings are typically enclosed by a large wall of some kind and there is usually a large main entrance into it. There are also some side doors that lower-ranked servants may use. Unfortunately these buildings are typically (though there are exceptions) one large room, separated by doorways (but no doors usually) and possibly curtains. In other words, it means that sometimes “room” implies the entire building.

Book Two

'Tragic Nations, War of Love'

Chapter 12

During the night, Pingting safely came out from her room.

In her hands was a small bag. Accompanied by Dongzhuo, Pingting glanced back and saw flickers of light hidden in the mountain.

Which one of those was her Master's room light? She suddenly felt a wave of sadness flood through her.

"You don't need to accompany me anymore," Pingting told Dongzhuo, "You can go back now."

"I..." Dongzhuo stopped himself and hesitantly handed the reins to Pingting, mumbling, "Take care of yourself."

Pingting got onto the horse, which was a bit sudden, for she and the horse swayed slightly. As farewell, Dongzhuo softly said, "Sis..."

Pingting couldn't help but look back.

Dongzhuo seemed to be unsure of what he wanted to say, but he raised his head and said, "To be honest, I told everything about tonight to Master."

Pingting studied Dongzhuo, then glanced back at the peaceful rooms where the people of the Jing-An Ducal Residence were sleeping in. They were supposed to find out tomorrow and leave for a better hideout. She felt a pang of sadness, "What did Master say?"

"Master said, if you believe in yourself, you would stay. If you don't, we won't stop you nor would we able to."

"Anything else?"

Dongzhuo lowered his head. "Nothing else."

The corners of Pingting's mouth lifted into a smile, feigning a sigh. "Dongzhuo, you've finally grown old

enough to lie.”

“I...” Dongzhuo lowered his head even more, refusing to speak for some time. “Master also said that you should be able to go by yourself, but you asked me to help instead, which was...which was actually a final plan to force Master into a dilemma. He said that he wanted to fall into your trap and have you by his side, but now...”

“Now is the crucial moment when the fate of the House of Jing-An is decided. It’s not cruel to give up on a maid.” Pingting continued, raising her face towards the starry sky, laughing bitterly. “I’ll tell you this, Master isn’t wrong.”

Without waiting for Dongzhuo’s response, Pingting flicked down her whip.

The finest horse of her residence screamed as it galloped away. She held tightly onto the reins, tears blurring her vision.

Goodbye, dear House of Jing-An. Your brilliance, radiance, no longer has anything to do with Pingting.

Departing Soul lies on the windowsill. When the sun rises tomorrow, the burning light reflected upon its blade will be printed on my empty bed. A silhouette game we played as children.

Sadly, Pingting isn’t merciless enough.

If I were merciless enough, the blade would be slightly tilted towards the opposite building. The light would bounce off it, like off a polished mirror or a large bronze bell. The light would reflect into the distance, alerting your pursuers of your location.

Master, no, He Xia, what would you think then?

The sun began to slowly climb up the clouds of the east.

Every time she rode past, a cloud of dust followed. She continued to ride the yellow paths north.

The tear tracks on her face had long been covered with sand. Pingting glanced back, half squinting at the orange-red sun. The sun was rising soon and with it, a strong, warm feeling rippled through her body.

“Go!” She took a gulp of water before continuing her journey.

Towards the wind she rode, through the endless plains of yellow mud. Bei Mo lay beyond, a place where there was no He Xia and no Chu Beijie.

Chapter 13

The wild yet fresh grass was just as pretty as Yangfeng claimed.

She had finally reached Bei Mo. A world of nature stretched before her, perhaps it was because of the proud mountains or maybe the passing of winter and the feeling of spring was much stronger than back in the South. In the midst of the lush green forest, energetic-looking shrubs dazzled in the sunlight.

A clear stream ran from the top to the bottom of the mountain.

Some other people had tied their horses to a tree and were busy filling their sacks with the clear water.

A slightly cold breeze enveloped her petite body which wasn't particularly pretty, but somewhat gaunt. Her eyes gleamed brighter than black crystals. She touched her forehead briefly before galloping away, her eyes never leaving the distance.

Far away, shepherds were sang while gathering up their stock.

“An eagle flies, the sky is higher. Ah, beautiful girl, chasing young foals on the grasslands...”

Pingting couldn't help but laugh as she grabbed the sac of water from her waist.

So cold. It must be melted ice from the mountain tops.

She playfully sipped again, and this time she closed her eyes too. So sweet.

Nearly there. The tiring yet worthwhile impression people usually had was at the back of her mind but all she could think about was her close friend's hiding place. Choosing an old tree, she leaned on it to rest before closing her eyes.

Yangfeng's choice to escape everything no matter what, was that a good choice? In half a day, she'd be able to know the answer.

What about the path Pingting chose? Going to Bei Mo wasn't a bad idea as it did have blue sky and green grass. Maybe she was suited to such places, among the rough but pure and honest folks, among the less calculating people.

Gurgling water, magnificent green mountain.

Her eyes were still closed when she heard footsteps approach her.

Someone's there? Pingting opened her eyes. Another traveller was apparently admiring the view, the reins of his horse in his hands.

A man with broad shoulders, the sword that hung from his waist and the bow on his back seemed to be things he deemed important. It was difficult to tell his age due to his beard, but his eyes were bright.

When he realised that there was already someone else there, in particular a big eyed girl, he looked a bit stunned.

“Nice horse.” The man wasn't interested in Pingting herself but her horse, as his eyes were genuinely appreciative.

Pingting smiled, untied her horse, time to go.

“Miss, are you willing to sell it?” His voice was loud, definitely a man of the grasslands.

He was right. This horse was one of the very best, even in Jing-An Ducal Residence. Dongzhuo, that guy, was quite nice, as he had chosen a good horse and had given a lot of money to Pingting.

“Not selling.” She jumped onto her horse casually, trying to get over her joy. Pingting closed her eyes for several seconds before opening them again. “Mister, Petal Cottage is ahead right?”

“You're going to Petal Cottage?”

“Yes.”

“Do you live in Petal Cottage?”

“No, I'm just looking for someone.”

The man laughed, “That cottage is abandoned. You won't find anyone there.”

“They moved?” Pingting was surprised, “Why move? Where did they go?” Suddenly her thoughts were muddled. Yangfeng would never move unless something happened.

Pingting decided that Yangfeng hadn't contacted her new location due to safety reasons, but this only made her more concerned about her friend.

“They moved only recently.”

“Where did they move to?”

“Hey, Miss, sell me this horse.” Good horses were just as important to shepherds as the girl they liked.

A corner of Pingting's mouth lifted. “Do you know what happened to Petal Cottage? What's your name?”

“I'm A-Han. Now, are you going to sell your horse or not?”

She jumped off her horse and thrust the reins into his waiting hands. “I'll give it to you for no charge. All I want to know is what happened to my friend.”

A-Han shook his head violently. “I don't want something without giving anything back in return.” He took out enough silver to buy two good horses and gave her the coins. “I'll tell you this; the landlord of Petal Cottage is an important person! He's the famous General Ze Yin! Who would've thought he had a small cottage in the mountains? But since the King has sought him out, given him more rewards and made him govern Bei Mo, he decided to move out of the mountains. Everyone else who had been living in the mountains has gone as well.”

“Really?” Pingting frowned, pondering. She threw back A-Han's money. “Take this. I'll use it to buy your horse. After all, I do need one. She ought to have changed to a horse without the House of Jing-An security imprint a long time ago.

“No, my horse isn't that good. I can't take advantage of things like this.”

Pingting untied his horse and jumped on it, then turned back towards him, winking cheerfully. “Tall guy, save up some money and marry a good wife. You're a good person!” She gently whipped her new horse, leaving peals of silvery laughter behind.

The cool air of the grasslands was enough to brighten her mood, the freshly cut grass smell was incomparable to that of Gui Le and Dong Lin. The shepherds continued their lively songs, which echoed in Pingting's ears.

“My beloved prairie, these cows and horses, the stream that flows through the young blades of grass. All this, cannot be compared to my beautiful girl...”

Pingting smiled, but it did little to conceal her worried frown.

Ze Yin, the mighty general of Bei Mo, hadn't he promised to make Yangfeng happy no matter the cost? Yet now he had decided to answer the Bei Mo King by returning into the political world; what did that mean?

Originally, she would only need half a day by horse, until she would be able to see Yangfeng, at Petal Cottage. But now, it seemed that she'd have to go even further into Bei Mo's capital — to Bei Yali.

“You won't even let me have a few days of happiness?” Pingting wrinkled her nose up at the sky. Travelling alone had given Pingting the habit of talking to herself.

Is it really a good thing that the House of Jing-An is no longer a part of me? What about Dong Lin? Sigh, Chu Beijie...

Unconsciously she started to frown. Her fingers slowly rubbed her eyebrows as if they were rubbing away the pain she felt.

Learning how loud the people of the grasslands shouted, she brought down the whip hard. Dust came again as the graceful figure got smaller and smaller into the distance.

Dust and sunset; where were the heartbroken people?

I hope the sky has a soul, one that will give both grass and forgiveness. No matter where I go, I hope happiness follows.

Bei Mo's general, Ze Yin, only returned back to the political world after being summoned three times by the King.

It wasn't like that the Bei Mo King didn't value Ze Yin.

Back then, his reputation was someone young and brave, the idol of the naïve Bei Mo King, but then he suddenly decided to retire and gave up his promising future for a reason he refused to say.

“Must be love,” guessed the Bei Mo King.

It wasn't just a saying that men often chose beautiful women over their country.

Ze Yin had stood before the Bei Mo King, his lips playing into a carefree smile. His smile was so innocent that the King of Bei Mo wondered if he really would be able to keep Bei Mo's best general by his side.

When a man falls in love, nothing will stop him from wanting to do stupid things.

The Bei Mo King couldn't help but nod.

And now, Ze Yin was back.

The news of Bei Mo's favourite general returning to protect the country was bound to bring joy and pleasure to all of the people.

Bei Yali had been a scene of joy and song as Ze Yin entered the city, leading the other residents of Petal Cottage. He was not only greeted by the Bei Mo King himself but he had also been greeted by the eager cheers of thousands upon thousands of peasants.

The newly designed residence was already waiting for Ze Yin, decorated and glittering brilliantly.

Yangfeng was in the most magnificent building, listening to the chatter that still managed to flow through the thick walls. Ze Yin was summoned back into the political side. She was pleasantly surprised to find herself being visited by an old friend.

The maid at the door refused to notify her name and Yangfeng's eyes were so big that they looked as if they were going to fall.

"How long are you going to stare at me?" Pingting was sitting on a chair, smiling as she said this.

"Long time no see, so why won't you let me have a good look at you?" Yangfeng gave a faint sigh, stretching towards Pingting, her fingers as white as ivory. "Pingting, come here. Let me have a good look at you."

Pingting grinned and laughed, "Yes sir, my General...no, wife of a General." She walked towards Yangfeng, sitting down on the bed beside her.

The two pairs of equally intelligent eyes stared into each other, the reflection of each other perfectly imprinted inside them.

"You've lost some weight."

Pingting couldn't help but smile, "You've become prettier."

"I really missed you; I just can't stop thinking of our childhood. I can't really talk to anyone else apart from you."

"Yangfeng..." Pingting interrupted, "Why didn't you ask about it?"

“Ask?” Yangfeng's smile wavered slightly, so she lowered her head. “I...don't dare ask. Why would you leave your Master, unless for some unspeakable reason? That reason must be very, very scary.”

Like the rumbling of a drum, Pingting chuckled. “It's really quite thrilling when you think about it. Play a song for me and I'll tell you everything from the start.”

The qin was on the small table beside the bed. Yangfeng looked at her, deep in thought. She picked up the qin, fingertips lightly touching a string.

Tremble.

Her heart fluttered at the inaudible but existing sound of a plucked string. The pressure, the sadness, in her heart jumped up, breaking through the walls she had built over her emotions.

“Yangfeng!” Pingting cried, flying into the arms of Yangfeng, tears flowing down her cheeks.

Let the tears flow down and into the earth. This wasn't Gui Le, nor was it Dong Lin. The person who made her sad wasn't here nor was the person who made her soulless here.

How was she supposed to forget that beautiful winter day, that gentle night, that tall figure, or the crystal-clear memories of living in the Residence for the last eighteen years?

How was she supposed to make Yangfeng realise that she had fallen in love with a man? She loved him but then hurt and lied to him. She even made the decision to leave him even if it meant death, only to realise that she could no longer return to the Jing-An Ducal Residence?

Today, under Yangfeng's solemn eyes, Pingting was finally able to cry out the pain she felt, and they came out like peas being poured out of a bag.

Under this sky, perhaps only Yangfeng understood her heart.

Pingting just cried without speaking, leaving Yangfeng to guess what had happened. It had to be something to do with love, or else Pingting wouldn't be so upset.

But who had the ability to make arrogant Pingting fall in love?

“What's his name?” Yangfeng patted her hair.

Pingting was still tearful as she clenched her teeth, her words full of pain. “Chu. Bei. Jie.”

Dong Lin's Duke of Zhen-Bei? Yangfeng looked slightly inattentive, but then she sighed again, softly saying, “Cry. Have a good cry.”

The walls did not close as Pingting collapsed again into Yangfeng's arms, tears dripping.

“Yangfeng, I'm now finally...” Pingting sluggishly pulled herself up but then suddenly stopped as she felt something rise in her throat. She shrieked a “waah” as she coughed up red blood.

“Pingting!” Yangfeng stood up, staring at her dyed-red clothes. “Come! Someone, come!”

And so, after her big cry, she got sick again.

Only yesterday, she had been thinking that she wouldn't be so lonely anymore.

Pingting's sickness was back.

Way more intense and dangerous than before.

Thanks to the service readily available at the Residence though, immediate treatment was given to her. Under Ze Yin and Yangfeng's care, Pingting slowly got better again.

After a couple days of rest, Pingting was able to sit up again. Her big cry had done her good as her chest was no longer always in pain, and although she was very sick, she recovered faster than previous times.

“You're looking better,” said a voice from a familiar figure on the other side of the blinds. Yangfeng came in, laughing. “The doctor says that you'll be able to get out of bed in two days. My, you sure scared me.”

“Come, sit here.” Pingting patted a spot beside her on the bed.

Yangfeng sat before taking out a hairpin to which she carefully inserted into Pingting's hair. Studying her, she said, “This is what the King gave Ze Yin, I didn't look that good wearing it so I'll give it to you.”

Pingting checked herself in the mirror that Yangfeng brought. “Did you bring it to me deliberately?” Pingting paused again, asking, “Does the General know where I come from?”

“He didn't ask,” Yangfeng replied. “As long as you're my friend, he will protect you, but...” The face that was slightly plumper saddened. “He's about to lead his troops out of the capital.”

The atmosphere was suddenly gloomy like heavy clouds covering the sun in summer.

Pingting took the mirror out of Yangfeng's hands, put it on the bedside table, but didn't say anything.

Yangfeng said, “We were always close. I didn't lose to you in qin, but I am absolutely inferior to you when it comes to scheming.”

Pingting forced her lips into a smile, “You were always arrogant. When did you humble up so much?”

“I'm just a little clever, someone who lives among walls, surrounded by her husband's people whether it be in Petal Cottage or in the General's Residence. When it comes to military affairs, you are the one who represents all women.” Yangfeng's deep black eyes drilled into Pingting before softly asking, “Why does the Bei Mo King suddenly want Ze Yin to regain military power? Ze Yin isn't greedy for money or fame unless Bei Mo is in big trouble. He wouldn't sacrifice everything and bring me here, despite his oath. I don't understand, Pingting, can you tell me what's going on?” Yangfeng stressed on every syllable.

Life outside the window was full of life, but the room was a deathly quiet.

Pingting was silent; her head was bowed.

Yangfeng's inquiring eyes blazed towards her head. Sometime later, Pingting appeared to be tired as she lifted her head and leaned on a soft pillow. With a wry smile, she said, "Chu Beijie fell into a trap, and was forced to leave his sword. He vowed not to attack Gui Le in the next five years. Dong Lin's King wants to conquer all lands, and since Gui Le is currently an impossible feat, it's natural that he'd change his target. Basically, does this mean Dong Lin has already started to attack Bei Mo?"

"Yeah," Yangfeng frowned wearily, "These days, Ze Yin is always talking about Chu Beijie, Dong Lin's best general, the Duke of Zhen-Bei...these days people call him the Demon King from the depths of Hell. A lot of people have already died in his hands."

Her eyes stared into Pingting and then her lips slowly rose into a soft and flowery smile. "Don't worry, we don't have any control over men's things. I really don't understand why they're always trying to expand the King's territory. Is having a lasting impression really that important? Ze Yin is going soon so I want to spend some more time with him these days." She stood up, her hands pressing gently against Pingting's shoulders. "You've only just gotten better, so lie down a bit more. If it gets boring here, ask some of the maids to go outside and pick some flowers for you. If you have any problems, send someone to find me."

Yangfeng left through the bead curtain. The sudden tinkling sound seemed to upset Pingting as she frowned.

It seemed like there was a huge trap in every direction, one that people could not escape from.

And it was something terrible.

Chapter 14

It seemed that the green grasslands refused to be Pingting's paradise. Around four, before sunrise, a tired figure stood quietly next to the window.

The birds and flowers that danced in the sunlight were long gone, and if you went out with just a candle, the flowers looked more like claws, reaching out for their oblivious prey.

Yangfeng's husband had already left for his journey and Pingting, who was deep inside the Residence, heard the servants whispering about how the big, heroic generals were all leaving at the same time but many wondered how likely the success would be.

Don't even think about it.

Pingting shook her head. She gazed at the undistinguishable grasslands and at the bright moon but then suddenly squinted in pain.

"Let's swear to the moon, never turn our backs on each other."

That person said to the moon, in his unwavering rich deep voice. Her heart raced as she thought of him, her hands were clutched at her chest, and she bit her lips.

Don't think about it, but she couldn't forget. Back then when, she thought, when we swore to the moon, you owed me and I owed you.

She was feeling depressed when she saw a light flickering towards her in the distance. Pingting watched its red light beckoning closer, but she only realised who it was only when the lamp was very close.

“Why are you still awake?”

Yangfeng hadn't expected that someone would be by the window and she jumped back in surprise. “I should be the one asking. Why are you still awake?” She broke into a laugh, “Don't tell me I'm a failure as a hostess and that I failed to meet the needs of my guest?”

Pingting walked out of the door and eyed the maid who was accompanying Yangfeng curiously. She took her arm and led her inside.

“We haven't had time to catch up for a while now, so as a guest, I'll be holding onto my hostess today.”

The two sat on the bed together and looked at each other fondly. “Burning incense this late?” Pingting asked.

“He's been gone for a couple of days already, but I just can't fall asleep until late at night.” Yangfeng sighed quietly. She leaned on a pillow, half of her face covered by the soft cotton. She gazed at Pingting with a child-like face, “You mustn't laugh at me.”

Pingting couldn't help but smile at this but she didn't dare make a sound either.

“I said, you mustn't laugh.” Yangfeng saw her smile so she got up and pinched Pingting.

“There's nothing wrong with missing your husband, so why does it matter whether I laugh or not? I heard that some famous generals always promise their wives to write a letter home every day to stop them from worrying all the time. I'm not wrong, am I?”

Yangfeng's white face flashed to a bright red, “You're still laughing? If you mock me anymore, I'll be going.”

But Pingting bit her lip to hide her laughter and Yangfeng knew that it was a lost battle. She flashed Pingting an evil glare and lay back down again.

Crisp laughter flooded into the room like the sound of a stream gushing down a mountain.

The two seemed to be back in the past where they would laugh all the time. Yangfeng broke the nostalgic atmosphere by sighing. “I haven't laughed like this since becoming the General's wife.”

Just one sentence and all memories were put away again; Pingting stopped laughing and lowered her head in silence.

Yangfeng hesitated for what seemed like ages, when she gently asked, “Will they meet on the battlefield?” The biggest problem was finally touched upon, causing the air to feel heavy.

Yangfeng seemed unwilling to look at Pingting in the eye, as she turned to face the wall. "If they do meet, who will win?" she questioned.

"Both are exceptional, the victory will depend on God. I...I don't know."

Yangfeng's face was expressionless, "God does not fight battles, only generals and their tactics. Ze Yin versus Chu Beijie. Who do you think will win?"

Pingting was still shaking her head, her eyes falling on the swaying flowers outside the window. "Do you...really want my answer? Chu Beijie is Dong Lin's best general, his army and battle skills are exceptional, outstanding. Your husband is the most celebrated general in Bei Mo, but I have never seen him myself. How am I supposed to compare the two?" She wanted to smile to cheer up Yangfeng, but she couldn't muster up any strength to do so.

Dear to the moon is outside, you don't need to be so heartless. You see the love and friendship of humanity, but you do nothing to stop the bloodshed of those people.

The candle wick sizzled and Pingting turned to look at it. The wind blew in like uninvited guests.

The light flickered, flared up, and then went out.

The silence that followed was like a heavy curtain, crushing them.

"Pingting..." Yangfeng said sadly, "Don't you have anything assuring to say to me?"

Pingting was surprised. She quickly sat up, "Yangfeng, why would you ask that?"

Yangfeng was facing the other way. Silence. Pingting could make out that she was trembling, like she was fighting back her tears. "Don't cry, we can't do anything about these battles. God will bless your husband so that he will return home safely. Yangfeng, didn't...you say that battles aren't our business?"

Yangfeng's shoulders shook even more. She was usually always so calm and collected, and Pingting had never seen her so distraught. She gently turned Yangfeng until she was facing herself.

Yangfeng suddenly sat up and looked at Pingting, her cheeks stained with tears.

Pingting was alarmed yet gently asked, "Yangfeng?"

Yangfeng didn't answer, she simply jumped out of bed and knelt at Pingting.

Pingting was flabbergasted. She too jumped out of bed to help Yangfeng up. "Why are you doing this?"

But Yangfeng had decided not to get up. She pulled at Pingting's sleeves, looking up at her indignantly, but her voice was mournful when she said, "Pingting, do you really not understand?"

Pingting was shocked, her dark eyes staring down quizzically at her friend.

“If even the Marquess of Jing-An was not able to defeat Chu Beijie, then how is Ze Yin supposed to do so?” Each word was dragged out of Yangfeng's mouth, her hands clawing at Pingting's feet as she cried, “You made a deal for five years of peace for Gui Le, so why can't you drive Chu Beijie and his troops out of Bei Mo?”

“Yangfeng, I...” Pingting took a step back and slumped on the bed. “I can't do that.”

She could not face Chu Beijie, but how was Yangfeng supposed to understand that?

That man, although he was not in front of her physically, he was always there in her dreams. He had taken her soul, leaving her in a puddle of tears.

“Pingting, please, I beg you.”

Yangfeng's praying eyes sent a chill up Pingting's spine. She could not bear seeing Yangfeng's gentle, wise eyes being engulfed by the colours of despair.

But she still shook her head, “No.”

Both pairs of black pupils shook and their breathing seemed to have stopped altogether.

Yangfeng stared at her for a long while. She smiled sadly, “I don't blame you. Men....Military affairs...I don't even know half as much as you.” She was chuckling, but more tears slipped down her cheeks as she patted her lower abdomen.

Pingting noticed that she was acting slightly differently than usual. Realisation suddenly dawned her. “Yangfeng, don't tell me you...” Her voice trailed off, her eyes never leaving her lower abdomen.

Yangfeng clenched her teeth and nodded.

Pingting sighed and leaned against the bed rail.

Those two, Yangfeng and Pingting, were never destined to be away from everything after all.

Chapter 15

Evening came; the soft breeze left. A frosty dawn.

As the red sun rose from the east, bright colours were casted onto Bei Mo King's Royal Residence. The Bei Mo King was already awake. He hadn't slept well and had insomnia for the last couple of days. Ever since the Dong Lin troops had arrived, he slept less and less every passing day just like how the Dong Lin army pressed closer towards the capital. According to yesterday's report, Chu Beijie had begun a siege, and many Bei Mo soldiers were wounded or dead. Thanks to Ze Yin's efforts, Dong Lin soldiers haven't reached the capital yet, but the current army population certainly wasn't big enough to last another siege.

Losing Kanbu was only a matter of time.

When the Dong Lin army captured Kanbu, it would be like an expressway to capture the capital of Bei Mo.

Bei Mo was in grave danger.

Yangfeng came to see him early in the morning.

“I want to tell you about someone, King.” She bowed before speaking and wore a dress given to her by the King himself.

The Bei Mo King always had a good impression of Ze Yin's favourite woman, and now that Ze Yin was gone, he was even happier to see her. He smiled kindly at Yangfeng. “Oh? Who's important enough that needs you to personally introduce to me?”

Yangfeng replied softly. “King, you really are clever. This person is extremely skillful and could perhaps change the course of the war.”

Yangfeng came with Ze Yin when he returned to the capital, but she was already the prettiest woman in the Royal Residence. She was born with delicate bone shapes, those that leave a lasting impression on others. He had heard about her personality from Ze Yin and knew that she did not like empty promises. She would never say something unless she was at least seventy or eighty percent sure. The King was surprised. “Who? Bring him in.”

But Yangfeng wasn't so urgent. She fell onto her knees and said, “Sir, this person's surname is Bai and is named Pingting. We've been good friends since childhood. Pingting didn't want to do this at the start, but Yangfeng begged. My friend finally agreed but on three conditions.”

“Speak.”

“Yes,” Yangfeng responded. “Firstly, help will only be given when Bei Mo is in trouble. If Dong Lin ever retreats, my friend will leave and never be involved with Bei Mo again.”

The Bei Mo King couldn't care less. After all, there was no secure frontier. He nodded gladly and said, “I will not force anyone to do what they don't want to.”

“Secondly, no person in Bei Mo shall identify or research Bai Pingting's past.”

“This...” Ever since the four countries started fighting, each country had their own spies. If Kings need people, they would need to research their history intensively. If they didn't, wouldn't that lead to the ruin of their own country? Why was this Pingting, so secretive? The Bei Mo King was annoyed but didn't show it as Yangfeng was personally introducing this person.

Yangfeng saw his expression and quietly added, “King doesn't have to worry. My friend has had many painful moments thus doesn't want anyone to know. There won't be betrayal; I'll put my life on the line to prove that.”

From this, the Bei Mo King immediately relaxed. The sides of his mouth twitched into a laugh.

“Employment depends on the King himself. I'll decide whether this person is trustworthy or not. So what's the point of putting your life on the line to prove loyalty? What's the third condition?”

Yangfeng answered, “If the King doesn't want Bei Mo to be conquered, you must listen to every word.

Nothing can be changed.”

This was the same as giving governorship of Bei Mo to a stranger. Bei Mo's smile instantly evaporated. He coldly said, “If your friend wants Bei Mo military power, shouldn't he just ask to be an army general?”

Unexpectedly Yangfeng replied, “Military power is one of the things she wants. Yangfeng begs King to give her all commanding rights to Pingting. She'll definitely drive away the Dong Lin army.”

The Bei Mo King's face changed. He forced himself to smile while thinking of saving Ze Yin from shame. “Your friend really likes to brag. Even your husband doesn't dare to underestimate the mighty general of Dong Lin, Chu Beijie, yet your friend...” Suddenly his heart jumped, and in astonishment he cried, “She?”

“Yes.”

The Bei Mo King looked even more unamused. He leaned forward. “How can a woman have such skill? Fine, give her some money and send her home.” How ridiculous. The enemy had arrived in their country, so many of the army generals needed his expertise whereas he listened to the rubbish chatter of an idiotic woman.

Yangfeng bowed, wondering whether to clarify things, but she hadn't expected his support in the first place. Without the help of Pingting, wouldn't her husband die? She bit her lip. “Please listen to me one last time, King.”

The Bei Mo King couldn't bring himself to embarrass her so he generously nodded. “You may speak.”

Yangfeng hesitated before walking towards him. She whispered in his ear. “I promised Pingting not to tell anyone, but as the lives of the Bei Mo people are at stake, Yangfeng must tell you. King mustn't underestimate Pingting. Ze Yin may not be Chu Beijie's opponent but Pingting definitely is.”

“What do you mean?”

“Because Pingting forced Chu Beijie into a truce for five years before this.”

The Bei Mo King was startled. He turned around and stared at Yangfeng.

Yangfeng didn't waver under the Bei Mo King's attention. She nodded slowly and whispered, “Chu Beijie has feelings for Pingting. If he knows that she is in Bei Mo, he won't attack so hard, and Ze Yin will have a greater chance of victory.”

“But what if...”

“If Chu Beijie can't forgive her, then...” Yangfeng felt a lump in her throat and her face looked sad. “Why would King ask Yangfeng such a cruel question?” Thinking of Pingting outside the room made her heart twist. Fighting back her tears, the beauty said, “Please King, summon Pingting immediately.”

“Call for Pingting.”

“Call for Pingting!” Voices overtook one another until it reached the waiting Pingting. She settled down her

teacup, checked over her clothes, and sighed deeply before stepping into the room, walking calmly towards the Bei Mo King.

Where in the world is a place you can escape from everything? She was now being swept in the Bei Mo's world of politics and military.

Chapter 16

"King." Pingting bowed after stepping lightly into the Bei Mo Royal Residence's main hall.

The Bei Mo King did not take offense when Pingting did not bow the most respectful way possible. Instead, he laughed. "You may get up. Yangfeng seems to really like you, My Lady, saying that you can shoo away the invading Dong Lin soldiers, is that true?"

Pingting sighed. If the Bei Mo King didn't hesitate when calling her 'My Lady', it meant that the situation in the army wasn't so good, so Bei Mo could only beg a fallen star like her. Could she really defeat Chu Beijie?

She was clearly distressed, but it was already too late. Pingting could see the hopeful eyes of Yangfeng who stood in front of her. "Your humble servant shall do her best," she said softly.

"Thanks to My Lady's words, Bei Mo now has hope." The Bei Mo King exchanged a look with Yangfeng before clapping his hands and cheering. His face then softened slightly. He spoke in a humble tone. "The army is in immediate danger; Dong Lin armies are approaching Kanbu. What will be My Lady's plans?"

Ever since Pingting decided to help Bei Mo, she had been studying Bei Mo maps at night, giving a quick, preliminary analysis over possible formations and tactics. She had not, however, known that the Dong Lin army had reached Kanbu so she was slightly surprised. "So the Bei Mo army has already been forced to the closest outer village? How come the messengers that have come back don't know about that?"

All of the information she knew came from Yangfeng, so she could not help but to look at her. Yangfeng hadn't known about this either; her face was pale as she shook her head no at Pingting.

The Bei Mo King gave a wry smile. "It was in the recent report late last night. The people of Bei Yali are afraid so I stopped the news from spreading. Luckily we have Ze Yin, or it'd be much worse. We should be able to secure Kanbu for a little longer under the command of Ze Yin but even he will not last much longer." The ruler unclenched his hands and sighed towards the ceiling. His eyes then flickered over to Pingting.

Pingting returned Bei Mo's stare, nodding to show she understood. "No wonder King is willing to use a foreigner like me." The situation was much worse than she had originally thought. Chu Beijie really deserved his title as Dong Lin's fiercest general.

She felt flustered, but she knew that something had to be done, or Yangfeng's unborn child would have no father. She forced herself to calm down, closed her eyes and thought hard.

The Bei Mo King and Yangfeng knew that she was thinking very hard. They did not make a sound, just quietly waited.

It was so silent in the main hall that it was difficult to breathe.

After a while, Pingting slowly opened her bright eyes which seemed to be full of new-found confidence. She smiled at Yangfeng then spun around to the Bei Mo King. "Maybe there is something I can do, but I need King's full support."

The Bei Mo King remembered Yangfeng's prior words. Without a trace of hesitation, he said, "My Lady can make as many requests as needed, be it money or materials."

"Good, then I'd like to ask King to tell me the truth. Does Bei Mo have a spy on the Dong Lin King's side?"

Bei Mo suddenly went silent, he'd only thought that Pingting would take frontline command of the army, not ask something like this. During times of wars, opposing countries always had spies, so that some confidential information could be obtained. But each country was careful with their spies, while cautious of others around them being spies of other countries. Though not many were sent at a time, the best was always sent and they were always the country's biggest secret.

Pingting could see the Bei Mo King's hesitation, so she explained herself. "I, your humble servant, do not mean to pry too much. It's just that this plan needs to be carried out by the people close to the Dong Lin King. King does not need to tell me the names of the spies, just tell me whether or not anyone can get close to the Dong Lin King's food."

"Eh!" Yangfeng exclaimed, "Don't tell me Pingting wants to poison the Dong Lin King?"

The Bei Mo King frowned, "That won't work. Sorry to say My Lady, I do actually have one or two people beside the Dong Lin King. Occasionally, they do have access to his food. However, all Kings nowadays have precautionary guidelines to prevent their food being poisoned and specialists to check for poison before consumption. Even if my people tamper the food, it will never reach the Dong Lin King's mouth. It'll be a useless attempt, and they'll know that there are spies in their residence."

To which Pingting calmly replied, "That wouldn't be a problem if the poison isn't detectable."

"A poison like that exists?"

"It's not exactly a poison; it's more like an anaesthetic." Pingting laughed, "It's a formula I came up with myself some time ago, you can put it into food and most inspection methods can't detect it. Adults can be in a coma for more than ten days and the pulse is much weaker, like the person is dying away slowly, but they'll wake up after some time."

"If it can pass the inspections, then all problems are solved," The Bei Mo King enthused, "I would have never imagined you'd be this clever! How long do you need to make this anaesthetic?"

"It's mainly made up of a variety of herbs, but we don't have time. We have to force the Dong Lin King into a coma before they conquer Kanbu," Pingting answered thoughtfully and then she added, "I should be able to make it in a day."

"Good!" The Bei Mo King smiled, "If the Dong Lin King suddenly falls unconscious, the Dong Lin Royal House would definitely fall into chaos because there will be a fight for the throne. Chu Beijie would have to

retreat and return home by then.” He laughed but soon sighed as if he thought of something else.

Yangfeng didn't understand, but Pingting did. She smiled slightly in response, “King is probably sighing over the effectiveness of this anaesthetic since it only lasts for about ten days. If there was a fatal poison that could pass the inspections, wouldn't the Dong Lin King be exterminated for once?” That was exactly what the Bei Mo King was thinking and she sighed as well. “I've spent a long of time and effort, trying to improve this formula, but it's never been able to fully kill someone. If I could do it, Gui Le wouldn't be torn apart by Dong Lin. Maybe it's God's will. If I could make such poison, maybe every country would face threats instead of the promise of peace.”

Yangfeng listened carefully and she thought of Ze Yin back in Kanbu, fighting. Her heart hurt, she couldn't help but whisper, “Why must good people fight and kill?”

The King of Bei Mo was still a King after all. He immediately, in the most practical way possible, returned to the original topic. “After the anaesthetic is made and is transported, Kanbu will be in a dangerous situation...What would My Lady do then?”

“That's right, King.” Pingting had guessed that the Bei Mo King would ask that. “We should first send people around the Dong Lin soldiers and spread rumours that there is an internal war in the Dong Lin royal family and the Dong Lin King is very sick. Chu Beijie will eventually hear the rumours but will not take them very seriously at first. However, there'll definitely be official messengers from Dong Lin. This will confirm that the Dong Lin King is in a coma and force Chu Beijie to retreat.”

Bei Mo King's eyes shone as he praised. “My Lady, that really is a powerful, comprehensive plan. It attacks the enemy both physically and psychologically.”

“King flatters me.” Pingting lowered her eyes, in politeness. “On the other hand, if Dong Lin attacks through the Kanbu's defence line first, the enemy troops will attack Bei Yali. If that happens, I'm afraid that the official messengers won't be able to reach Chu Beijie by then. That's why King must order some troops to stay around Bei Yali just to give Chu Beijie the impression that Bei Yali won't be easy enough to conquer in a short time.”

“I don't know anyone else more suitable to the task than you, My Lady.” At this, the Bei Mo King hesitated before taking the long prepared the flag of command. The Bei Mo King stared at the person before him, one who was about to become the highest army commander but looked very much like a weak woman. In a deep voice he said, “Be careful My Lady. Bei Mo's fate is in your hands now, My Lady.”

Yangfeng took a deep breath of cold air and walked towards Pingting. “I'll send Ze Yin a letter, telling him about you. With him around, you won't encounter the pain of soldiers not listening to your commands.”

Pingting's hands closed around the flag of command. She was silent, thoughts already flying over to Kanbu. How could she not be nervous? She was about to see Chu Beijie again. Only this time, they would be separated by thousands of horses, men, and bloodstained fields - it was time for confrontation.

Chapter 17

The next day, the anaesthetic was completely prepared. Instead of going back to the Royal Residence, Pingting simply gave the anaesthetic to Yangfeng and told her how to use it. “Don't get it wrong. There's

only enough to for one person.”

Yangfeng gingerly took it over, not exactly understanding. “Why don't you make enough for two, just in case something unexpected happens?”

Pingting gave an unfathomable smile, “I have my reasons. Those who spy in the enemy’s country must be wise, brave, and cautious. They won't waste such a precious compound. Don't worry.”

Her confident stance helped to persuade Yangfeng to calm down who then hid the anaesthetic close to her body. “When I get back into the royal quarters, I'll give the King this anaesthetic. Your escort team is ready to go, waiting for your command.” She took out letter with a military stamp seal from one of her sleeves and handed it to Pingting. “Put this away carefully and give it to Ze Yin when you see him.”

“You've written everything about me in it.”

“It’s to let him know everything should be better and make things easier for you to control the troops.” Yangfeng saw a sly look in Pingting's dark eyes. Two red clouds immediately rushed to her cheeks. In a warning tone, she said, “Don't peek. Apart from talking about you, the rest is between husband and wife. Little girls like you won't understand.”

Pingting laughed, “I don't see why it'd matter if I can't understand it anyway.” Yangfeng stamped her foot in response. Pingting shook her head and replied, “It's hard to tell that you're the wife of a top army official sometimes. People like you are supposed to be extremely wise. Instead, you easily get dishelmed by me. As for me, I have a great responsibility ahead - I'm about to go and fight on the battlefield. Call the escort team now. It's about time to go.” Then she walked out of the room.

“Pingting!”

“What's wrong?” Pingting turned around, her heart secretly in pain. She had forced a breezy expression onto her face just a moment ago, but if Yangfeng began a sorrowful farewell speech, it would provoke her into crying again. She was going to face Chu Beijie again.

If the army found out that their new commander had been crying, how would they take her seriously? Yangfeng darted out of the room and stopped four or five feet away from Pingting. Her dark eyes stared at Pingting for the briefest moment. “No matter what you do, you'll always be a girl. You'll be the main advisor of the army so stay in the headquarters. Don't force yourself out onto the battlefield.”

Pingting was stunned. It took a while for her to comprehend what she had heard. Her heart was touched. She gently held onto Yangfeng's hand. “Don't worry. How could I ever not know my limits? It was just joke when I said that I'm about to fight on the battlefield; I can barely pick up a knife and sword. It's getting late, I really ought to go. I'll be back with victory to see your baby. Oops, your baby won't be born yet right?”

Yangfeng was very upset nonetheless. The barely controlled tears were flowing fast. She bit her lip. “Joking even when becoming the nation’s leading general.” She was silent for some time, her tears continued to drip down.

When she looked up, Pingting was no longer before her. Faraway, the garden's gates closed and the figures were gone.

The horses of the carriage galloped, leaving clouds of yellow dust behind, dusty enough to stop people from seeing the road itself.

Sometime later, Pingting opened the curtain and squinted at her surroundings. Her head ached during the time in the carriage. She had been repeatedly studying the maps of Kanbu, memorising the names of every slope, mountain and river. She had even assessed the situation of the Bei Mo army from the news the Bei Mo King told and could easily recite the names of the army generals and their expertise.

“Nearly at Kanbu.” Pingting muttered to herself and couldn't help but sigh at the thought.

She spent every minute, every second on the map and the roster of soldiers. Everything was committed to memory and, nothing could stop her headache. The thought of facing Chu Beijie in Kanbu sent a throbbing pain into her head.

If the famous Bei Mo general, Ze Yin, hadn't been defending Kanbu all along, perhaps the city would have long collapsed under Chu Beijie's ferocious attack.

Could she really fight against him?

Each roll of the carriage wheel brought her closer to that man. She imagined Chu Beijie's majestic aura on the battlefield.

Pingting shook her head. Stop thinking about him. Stop thinking about him.

Taking a deep breath of cool air, she slowly opened her eyes, the twinkle in them dimming to fierce determination. The battle in Kanbu was no longer a war between Dong Lin and Bei Mo but a contest between Chu Beijie and Bai Pingting.

Did she really want to win? Pingting questioned herself as she gazed at the intimidating Army Command Representation beside her.

The carriage suddenly jolted to a stop, interrupting Pingting's thoughts. She heard the familiar voice of a general, Han Shuxi, who was outside. “We've arrived in Kanbu now, My Lady. You may come off the carriage now. The main general has come to greet you personally.”

Opening the carriage curtains, the first thing that caught her eye was the tall city walls, badly damaged and charred from smoke. It told her everything about the brutality that occurred in the past few days. Pingting slowly got out of the carriage, her eyes moving from the wall to the parade of people that specifically came to welcome her.

The leader of the group was covered in yellow dust and his beard was like a weed. Although his beard covered half of his face, his eyes were alight with determination. One could easily tell he was the type of person who never surrendered to things he thought weren't right.

Pingting revealed a shy smile and bowing. “You must be Main General Ze Yin. Having such a high ranking soldier personally welcome me is too much of an honour for a girl like me.”

Ze Yin shot forward and stopped Pingting from completely bowing, saying, "My Lady is here to be the main military advisor so there is no need to be so formal around us, your subordinates."

Lowering his voice, he added, "The King has already sent messengers here and Ze Yin will assist My Lady in every way possible. Shall we continue inside the city walls?"

Pingting nodded in agreement and took out Yangfeng's letter. Ze Yin instantly recognized Yangfeng's handwriting. A warm smile took over as he took it.

Other generals also came by and saluted, reporting their names and ranks.

The group of people entered a heavily guarded defence area. Ze Yin was not just being friendly to Pingting. He saw her as a proper advisor, even giving his sleeping quarters to her.

Inside the sleeping quarters, most things were either blue or black. It was evident that the original owner was bold and generous. A huge dark bow hung on the wall. Topographic maps of Kanbu were spread all over the bench. From what Pingting deducted, Ze Yin had continued to try to form a plan in defeating the enemy.

Pingting spun around, noticing that the room had a simple but effective layout, feeling that she understood Ze Yin a lot more. If it weren't for his beautiful wife at home, he wouldn't appear so elegant in public because elegance wasn't his style.

It was really God's work that a Gui Le woman as elite as Yangfeng had fallen in love with such a bulky man.

Ze Yin asked the other accompanying generals to stay outside for a while. "My Lady, are you satisfied with this place?" He asked. "Time is limited so I'm afraid My Lady will have to bear with it for a while. If the colours in here are too dark, you can get one of the serving soldiers to bring in bright coloured rugs or cloth though they might not be able to find any."

Pingting saw his calm expression but knew that he was still worried about the military situation. She laughed brightly, "Main General, you're too kind. The army is top priority at the moment. We don't have time to be worrying about minor things like this. Please tell me about the most recent situation; we'll talk before strategising."

Ze Yin was waiting for this all along. He beckoned to a seat and said, "Please sit, My Lady."

The two sat. Ze Yin's face became serious. In a low voice he reported, "Thirteen days ago, my army and I retreated to Kanbu, and Chu Beijie decided to siege us. Thanks to Kanbu's high and thick walls, defending so far has been fairly easy, but even so, many soldiers die just to force the Dong Lin soldiers back. Dong Lin obviously has the advantage of weapons and soldiers. Even I don't have the confidence of completely defeating them. Chu Beijie is indeed worthy of his reputation as he has repeatedly seen through my tactics."

"I have something I'd like to ask Main General. I hope you won't mind." Pingting continued, "The defence line of Bei Mo's boundaries has been tight with Main General in control. How come the Dong Lin army broke through the defence so fast that the whole Bei Mo army retreated to Kanbu, the last defence barrier?"

This question surprised Ze Yin and his eyes hardened as he looked directly at Pingting. He did not see ignorance in her glistening eyes. Then he cried out, mainly in awe. "If Yangfeng hadn't mentioned her best

friend so many times, I would have considered this question to be a serious blow to my pride. My Lady's question basically sums it up. You see, my army suffered massive defeat and were forced to retreat to Kanbu. The reason was not because we were outnumbered. The Dong Lin army was estimated to have one hundred thousand soldiers, but there were only around seventy-thousand. The military advisor's estimates were the ultimate cause of failure."

Ze Yin didn't notice that Pingting's expression had changed. He stood up and studied the maps of Kanbu again, remembering things as he looked at them. "I, Ze Yin, am probably one of the most famous army generals in Bei Mo, but even I had no idea what superior was until I met Chu Beijie. Not only has he seen through several of my tactics, he personally leads the army and fights well. Once, at the front line, in three slashes, he injured one of my best soldiers, Menchu. This had a negative impact on my soldiers for they lost confidence against such invincible figure. That's why we lost."

From his words, Pingting heard the fear of the soldiers and couldn't help but imagine Chu Beijie in the midst of a thousand horses and men, cutting down a fierce warrior in three graceful moves. It took a while for her to snap out of it, before calmly saying, "Main General, you don't need to lose heart. Although Chu Beijie is a scary person, even he has been kept outside the Kanbu walls for the past thirteen days, right?"

Ze Yin didn't immediately reply at this. After what seemed like forever he said, "I read Yangfeng's letter before coming in here. As My Lady knows Chu Beijie a lot better than me, you probably have a better understanding of this situation. However, everyone knows that once Kanbu is captured, the Dong Lin army will immediately reach Bei Yali and then we will become imprisoned slaves in our own country. So although everyone clearly knows that Chu Beijie will win, we are still desperately fighting back."

"Good thinking, Main General." Pingting nodded in agreement, "Retreating back to Kanbu gave your soldiers more confidence as the high walls gives the defensive side a bigger advantage. However, if these walls can't force the Dong Lin army to retreat, they will still capture this place sooner or later." Being out on the battlefield and surviving in the Royal Residence were two very different skills and the second one, Pingting was very capable of. The former was much more difficult, as one of the two competitors was much more advantaged than the other. The thought of Chu Beijie having everything he needed couldn't help but make Pingting sigh in disappointment. He controlled an army of the finest soldiers while she led a group of terrified soldiers out onto the battlefield.

Nevertheless, she felt a faint edge of pride. *On the battlefield, who else in the world can oppose Chu Beijie?*

She allowed herself to think of him for a few more moments before remembering that she was still in a discussion with Ze Yin. She stopped staring into space. Her face neutralised like a real military advisor, whose eyes never wavered.

In two or three sentences, Pingting had brought out Ze Yin's worries that he had to look at her more than once in the eye. "My Lady, you are right. Chu Beijie had tried out direct attacks on the first few days and both sides were severely injured. From the tenth day, Dong Lin's army stopped moving and went quiet. I reckon he's waiting for the time when my army drops guard, to prevent fewer casualties on their side."

"No." Pingting pursed her lips slightly, not frowning. She lifted her chin, looking serious and articulated her words one-by-one. "If Chu Beijie stopped attacking, he must have found better way to capture Kanbu. Knowing his calculating methods, his way of attack would be shockingly surprising and the impact would be unpredictable. It'll easily rip apart the Kanbu's inner defence system."

Ze Yin's expression was doubtful. "Is that even possible?"

Pingting didn't bother answering this question. She asked another instead. "Did you send any soldiers to spy on the Dong Lin army?"

"Lots but Chu Beijie takes note of these things and often sends huge troops to scout for spies around his residence. The spies can't stay too long and only know that the enemy army hasn't done anything yet." Ze Yin sighed, "Those who get a little bit more than usual end up never coming back."

"That must be right because Chu Beijie is already secretly carrying out his plan," Pingting analysed. "Main General, as the main military advisor, only tell the top commanding generals what we've discussed. Do not tell anyone else."

Ze Yin readily agreed. "Don't worry, My Lady. The people who you saw today are all the generals I trust and only they know that My Lady is the new advisor. Only me and the escort, Ruohan, know your real name, but we'll all call you 'My Lady'. The King clearly stated the last Order."

So this was why he, the main general, was calling her by the title, 'My Lady'.

Pingting nodded to show assurance. Her eyes drifted towards the door, onto the pebbled footpath out on the foyer. Quietly, she said, "Well, let's go and see the wall."

Up on Kanbu's magnificent city walls, Pingting saw the plains and mountains covered by the atmosphere of war. It was truly everywhere. Ze Yin stood up and pointed south-east, saying, "That's the Dong Lin army camp."

Her heart started to thump loudly.

"Dong Lin army camp huh..." Pingting tried to focus on the camp in the distance, but it was too far away. She couldn't even see the banners flapping in the air. She couldn't see the chiselled features of Chu Beijie either.

Guess what Chu Beijie? Pingting came.

Pingting couldn't escape so she came instead.

Chapter 18

Every second was crucial to finding out Chu Beijie's secret plan. Pingting wasn't interested in rewards; she simply wanted the rights to control the Bei Mo army from the King so that she had easier accessibility to command the army during difficult times. Apart from the few highest ranking commanders who briefly saw her upon arrival, she didn't appear in public a second time.

The meetings were held in the room Ze Yin had moved out for Pingting. He was the only one who had discussed battle tactics with her. Being also a good friend of his wife, her unknown background was disregarded. Ze Yin had long earned Pingting's approval. He was more than just helpful.

The Bei Mo army's current situation was not caused by Ze Yin's lack of ability but because of Chu Beijie's wit.

"What are thinking, My Lady?" Ze Yin finally broke the silence. He continued with informing the latest report. "This time, we've lost several dozens of frontline spies. They retrieved only insignificant news. What a waste."

Pingting mentally processed the report but didn't answer. She rolled open the map and aimlessly stroked across before stopping to point at the bottom corner on the right. Frowning, she muttered, "The South is full of dense forests, but that's all. Do you know why Chu Beijie sends troops everyday over there?"

Ze Yin gathered around the map and also frowned as if in deep a thought but only shook his head. "It's impossible to surround and attack from the back of Kanbu by going through that forest. It's not only a waste of time but also a massive waste of power. The forest is pretty dangerous as well, complete with poisonous snakes. The army could be diminished by more than a half before they even reach Kanbu."

Pingting flicked through a journal of Kanbu's battle history when a sudden thought washed over. "Is there a similar journal about the surrounding, dense forest?"

"That forest is dark, dangerous, and scary – there aren't many people willing to go there." Ze Yin continued, "But one of the previous head guards of Kanbu was dedicated and once collected data on the topography of the area around Kanbu. They have it preserved. There might be something about that forest in those books, but I'm not sure how detailed the data is. I'll retrieve it if My Lady wants."

He personally went to another library to get a set of very old, dusty-looking books and placed them on the table.

Pingting hoped that news of the Dong Lin King's unconsciousness would reach Chu Beijie soon before his yet to be predicted plan was in action. If not, and Pingting couldn't stop his plan, it meant the surrender of Kanbu and eventually the conquest of the Bei Mo country.

As of now, Ze Yin's once indestructible impression could no longer be recovered, and the only spark of hope for Bei Mo was Chu Beijie's infamous enemy, Pingting.

What bad luck — he would have been okay if his enemy wasn't the frustratingly invincible Chu Beijie, right?

Pingting realised the sudden change in the atmosphere. She stared at Ze Yin as understanding flickered into her eyes. "How many days has it been since you closed your eyes? A balanced lifestyle is needed to fight properly. You ought to get some rest."

"I'm fine."

Pingting chuckled and softened her words, "Well, General, I won't force you, but you're being manipulated by Chu Beijie. You see, his favourite tactic is scaring the opposition to prevent them from sleeping, then attacking when everyone is too tired. Often, the defending team has already collapsed from fatigue by the time he decides to attack."

Ze Yin nodded in understanding, "My Lady's right. Too much anxiety will damage our energy." The

corners of his mouth twitched into a bitter smile. “Honestly speaking, ever since fighting against Chu Beijie, I haven’t slept properly for ages. Tonight, I’ll sleep and get more confidence to fight against the Dong Lin army.”

He stood up. “I’ll check the soldier’s sleeping quarters before going to bed.” Then, he left the room.

Meanwhile in the Dong Lin army’s sleeping quarters, everyone had long gone to bed and was deep in their dreams, except for a few nightly guards.

No one was afraid of being attacked at night by the Bei Mo army since their last attempt at surprise attack had failed miserably. They couldn’t possibly be prepared for such sacrifice again.

No one worried whether conquering Kanbu was possible or not, and no one cared about the final victor either. Under the command of the best commander in the world and with the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s flag flapping in the wind, they felt sure that all of the instructions given were the best course of action.

The Duke of Zhen-Bei’s flag, at the moment, was firmly wedged in the central command tent, flapping loudly from the wind blowing from the dense forest of a hundred acres.

Light came from within the central command tent. Chu Beijie wasn’t asleep yet. A set of armour made of gold hung against the wall, occasionally reflecting the flickering candle flame. Moran stood quietly at the side, waiting for Chu Beijie to speak.

Chu Beijie hadn’t said a word ever since getting the latest report from their spy. Before long, Chu Beijie placed the report back into the file. Expressionless, he asked, “Who could possibly be their new advisor, who’s rumoured to be a woman?”

A certain name shot into Moran’s thoughts. He took a step back and replied, “The name and history of the new military advisor are considered the most confidential information of our enemy. Our spies might not be able to uncover such secrets.”

Chu Beijie sat down, studying Moran before calmly saying, “Our guess may be right.”

Moran reacted to this by raising his head to meet Chu Beijie’s eyes with an alarmed expression. He quickly collected himself together, hesitantly asking, “If it really is that person, what do you plan to do, Duke?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“We can’t be sure whether their advisor is her or not, so what if the original plan...”

Chu Beijie waved his hand. “Moran, no need to worry. Tell the spy that there’s no need to research the new military advisor any further. If it’s really Bai Pingting, she should be able to realise my plan before it’s too late.”

But Moran argued, “If it’s really her and she doesn’t realise Duke’s plan, wouldn’t she die with the rest of the Bei Mo army in Kanbu?” Moran felt Chu Beijie’s knife-sharp gaze on him. He quickly closed his mouth, refusing to continue.

“I don’t know though...” Chu Beijie seemed a bit worried as well. He rose and gazed towards the tent flap. He held it and admired the moon. Taking a deep breath of the cold night air, he finally managed to calm his thumping heart down. There was newfound determination in his eyes as he whispered, “If she didn’t have such skill and intelligence, would she be worthy of my love?” He turned, reassured his subordinate and chuckled. “It seems you still have your doubts. You can tell me.”

Moran knew that she was his weakness, but war was approaching and the main general must always have a clear, unwavering sense of purpose. He asked, “Doesn’t Duke want to capture Pingting alive?”

“So Moran thinks I want to capture Bai Pingting for revenge?” Chu Beijie smiled, “Remember this. No commander would stop after defeat for that would be a costly mistake. I want to capture Bai Pingting alive only because I respect her.” He pushed away the files on his desk and pushed open the worn map, thinking of the only woman he couldn’t forget. “If it wasn’t respect, why else would I want her to be captured alive?”

“Has Duke ever considered...” Moran’s eyebrows were creased again, “...that even if she figures out Duke’s plan, she might not be able to do anything about it?”

“You’re wrong. If she can figure it out, she’ll definitely outsmart it.” Chu Beijie’s expression didn’t change as he said, “When the sun rises from the East, I shall see if she’s worthier of my love than any other woman in this world. Well, well Pingting, if you really are in Kanbu, don’t disappoint me.”

Back in Kanbu, Ze Yin had just fallen asleep.

However, his sleep was short lived as it was soon interrupted by a loud thump at the door. The one knocking could only be that one person, someone who he couldn’t complain about despite it being three thirty in the morning.

“I know what his plan is.” Either excitement or worry had made Pingting’s white cheeks into a pale pink. She entered the room, lit a candle on the table, and opened an aged scroll. “Thank goodness I read some other old references after reading the books left by one of the previous head guards, or else our army would have suffered massive casualties and immeasurable damage. General, please look here.”

Ze Yin followed her pearly white finger. His thick eyebrows rose slightly. “Poisonous wasps?”

“These wasps can only be found deep in the mountains surrounding Kanbu; their nest should be where the forests are most compact. Their poison is extremely potent – just one light stab and even a wild bull would collapse. I’m familiar with medicine and had once heard about these wasps. Thanks to the reports General gave me, I realised that something was strange and now I’ve finally found the reason after spending all night flicking through books and scrolls.” Pingting noticed the look of bewilderment and doubtful expression on Ze Yin’s face. “Is something wrong, General?”

“My Lady guessed that Chu Beijie would use poisonous wasps to attack my army, right?” Ze Yin continued, “It’s easier said than done. I know about these wasps. Although these wasps are strong enough to poison our entire defence force, it would still be a hard task to accomplish. For one, where would you get all those wasps?”

Pingting had long thought about this. She calmly replied, “That’s why Chu Beijie has been sending troops into the forest. That’s where the wasps’ nests would be and only there can he collect enough for this plan.”

“Chu Beijie may be strong, but he’s not invincible. He’s not from Bei Mo, so how could he know and manipulate those wasps?”

Pingting sighed. “General is still underestimating Chu Beijie even at this time. His army of ten thousand men and horses has certainly created chaos around here, so it wouldn’t be unusual that his soldiers have died after being stung by some disturbed wasps. Once Chu Beijie learned of such a powerful, natural weapon, he would definitely send people to research the wasps’ habits. That’s why his army hasn’t been attacking recently.”

Ze Yin still shook his head but didn’t say anything.

Pingting carried on. “In the book, it says that poisonous wasps are very sensitive to the sap of the Sanhua tree. They can sense the sap from a faraway distance. This sap also makes their poison even stronger. There are huge patches of Sanhua tree in the East and West side of the Kanbu city walls. Say, what if Chu Beijie really wants to use these wasps to attack us? He must have ordered his soldiers to find these trees and chop them down. Then he will use the branches of the Sanhua tree, which is full of sap, as arrows and fire them from a long distance toward Kanbu, while releasing a huge number of wasps. The defending force will definitely be diminished to less than a half. When the wasps move away as the sap in the arrows slowly dries up, conquering Bei Mo’s last line of defence would be no problem.”

Ze Yin heard the urgency in Pingting’s voice. He couldn’t help but be uncertain of whether to believe or not. “I’ll immediately get someone to check whether the Sanhua trees on the East and West side have been cut down.”

He talked briefly to his personal assistant, who would pass on his commands, before turning back to her. “If it’s really like that, Chu Beijie’s plan is really a risk and really unbelievable, but Ze Yin still doesn’t understand.” He hesitated, “Please don’t be offended by Ze Yin’s directness. This plan is still rather...unusual, so I am wondering how confident My Lady is about it.”

“How confident?” Pingting was surprised by this question. She quickly hid her excitement over uncovering the enemy’s plan. She gripped the handle of her seat. It was several moments later before she broke into a smile. “If I said that I’m sure of such an unbelievable, strange trick, General would definitely laugh and won’t believe me. I don’t know why, really. When I thought of this wasp plan, I was sure it would be something Chu Beijie would do.” She forced a tight-lipped smile at Ze Yin. “If Bai Pingting couldn’t figure out Chu Beijie’s train of thought, what use could she be to Bei Mo?”

The candlelight in the room flickered while moths danced.

The bright moon hung high in the sky, casting silvery light throughout the city walls. Both inside and outside were full of soldiers dreaming of their homes.

Their lives depended on the decisions made by their commanders, their right and wrong guesses. It was like a cruel game.

And her opponent just had to be him.

Pingting pushed her hair to one side, remembering his strong hands slowly stroking her silky hair while

saying “This is mine.” with a small smile.

She had never known such a painful feeling before.

“Does General know what I want to do the most at the moment?”

“Ze Yin has no idea.”

Pingting pressed her lips together and smiled. “Same as General. I need a good rest.” She rubbed her chest, above her sore heart, with a finger. “But then again, who can rest properly after meeting Chu Beijie?”

She wanted to sigh but choked the urge away. Main advisors shouldn’t sigh. She considered herself a bad one because of that.

Under the moon, everything became clear. Ze Yin regretted his impoliteness that saddened Pingting. He coughed and then changed the subject. “There is something else I must know. Is there a cure to the poison?”

Pingting shrugged. “That’s another reason why I’m sure Chu Beijie would use the wasps. Even if the wasps’ poison enters the blood stream, the person can die, but if he or she first drinks a mixture of herbs that neutralises the Sanhua tree sap, they will be resistant to the poison. In the past, according to this book, those who entered the forests always drank this mixture beforehand. If all the Dong Lin soldiers drink this mixture, they won’t have to worry about getting stung.”

“Really?” Ze Yin furrowed his brow even further and stroked his beard thoughtfully.

“If the Dong Lin army released the poisonous wasps during the fight, our soldiers would try to run away from the wasps therefore they won’t defend properly. Those who continue to defend will be stung.”

At this time of unease, the General’s personal assistant returned. He was edgy as he came into the room, calling out. “General, the Sanhua trees on the East and West sides have been cut!”

Ze Yin turned towards him, and in a loud voice, he demanded, “How on Earth did those trees get cut down without us noticing?”

His personal assistant shook his head in confusion, but he knew that the current situation wasn’t good. “The forests on the East and West side are from the city walls. When General told us to defend from the walls with full power, the troops stationed there had retreated. Dong Lin must have been going there since then, secretly cutting down those trees and happily leaving afterwards so we didn’t realise anything.”

Pingting interrupted, “Did you take inventory of how many trees were cut down? How long would it have taken them?”

“The stumps have begun to dry so it must have been yesterday.”

Ze Yin and Pingting exchanged a look that said, “As expected”. Grinding his teeth, he commanded, “Pass on this command: prepare a huge pan for making medicine and take some of the best soldiers to cut down all of the remaining Sanhua trees.”

“Wait!” Pingting held out a hand and hurriedly explained, “It’s likely that Chu Beijie has some troops

stationed nearby, waiting for us to fall for some trap near those trees, not to mention that there's not enough time to make the medicine even if enough trees can be cut down. General, it's nearly morning." She pointed at the window that displayed grey skies.

"Chu Beijie might have not guessed that we know of his poisonous wasp plan. He might not have collected enough wasps anyway." Ze Yin stared at the sky and lowered his voice, "As long as he doesn't plan to attack today, we would not have to prepare too much to win the war."

Pingting sighed. "Chu Beijie would never make such a risky mistake. A day and a half is enough to cut down enough trees, make arrows with the sap, and concoct the resistant medicine. The Sanhua trees were cut yesterday. He'll definitely attack today."

Ze Yin shook violently at this, his eyes widened. It seemed like ages before words formed in his mouth. "Then, what should we do?"

Pingting didn't immediately reply. She instead opened the half-opened window. She closed her eyes and slowly breathed in the fresh morning air. It was almost as if she wanted the oxygen to circulate once through her tired body before she casually opened her eyes again.

In a commanding tone, she said, "No need to worry General. Ever since leaving Bei Yali, I've always known that there'd be a day like this. No one who has gone against Chu Beijie has had a successful outcome before, unless he pretended to be weak."

Thinking back to Gui Le's 'victory' that year made her chest ached. Pingting couldn't help but stare into the distance for a little longer. Finally, she swung back around chuckled, "Pingting would be delighted to know if there is still a playable qin with all strings still attached."

"A qin?"

"Yes. I plan to play somewhere up high where Chu Beijie can hear me play."

Ze Yin's expression instantly changed at this. He shook his head vigorously. "I know that My Lady has an unusual relationship with Chu Beijie, but this concerns two armies – it's serious. My Lady would be easily seen from all directions from a high building. You will be open to his arrows, not to mention the poisonous wasps. His super accurate shots are certainly no lie."

"I'm the main advisor. If General disobeys, I'll have to force you to agree." Pingting lifted the symbol of her authority. She grinned playfully but stopped when she noticed Ze Yin's solemn expression. "General was asked by Yangfeng to look after Pingting. Why fret? If Chu Beijie is willing to shoot Pingting, maybe, it'd mean the release that promises freedom." When she finished, she strode out of the room.

In the Dong Lin army, the soldiers had long been awake. Everyone was taking turns to drink a medicine that didn't taste too good from a huge pan. The troops stood in an orderly fashion, swords in their hands.

Several dozen lumpy, leather bags were distributed out to the other soldiers by Chu Beijie's personal assistants. The buzzing sound never stopped. A separate troop was tightly wrapped in clothing, having just completed the task of making arrows from the branches of full Sanhua tree sap. Their next task was to shoot these arrows towards Kanbu in order to attract the wasps and strengthen their poison.

It was likely that there were traces of the luring Sanhua tree sap on the soldiers, and although they had a share of the medicine, being stung is still painful thus they decided to wrap themselves up in clothing. They covered as much of their hands, feet, and face as they could.

Chu Beijie and Moran stood outside, waiting for the other generals to finish their check up and confirming for zero errors before going back up to the command platform.

“When my soldiers attack the city, where will she be?” Chu Beijie asked, frowning once he was on the platform.

Only Moran understood among the crowd what Chu Beijie was thinking. He knew that the Duke was troubled. The best thing for Moran though was to pretend not to know and stand with the others, waiting for Chu Beijie’s next command.

After a long pause, the crowd still heard no command from Chu Beijie and began to exchange confused glances with each other. No one dared to interrupt Chu Beijie’s thinking; they all just glared at Moran.

As second in command, Moran pretended to be thick-headed and called, “Duke, it’s about time.”

“Good,” Chu Beijie lifted his head from his daze and returned the gazes of his trusted commanders. He calmly smiled and said, “It’s been a while since I felt such anticipation, but today is an exception. Maybe this attack on Kanbu will be a lot more interesting than I predicted. Maybe it’ll be the end or perhaps a new beginning. Everything... depends on whether their new advisor is worthy enough for me to go all out against.” Eyes flashing, he shouted, “Let’s go!”

Everyone shouted “Yes!” as his command rippled through the crowd, lifting everyone’s fighting spirit.

The mighty Dong Lin army, after a brief truce, under the influence of the powerful Duke of Zhen-Bei, has finally begun its attack against Kanbu.

Chapter 19

The war drums rumbled against the ground.

The Dong Lin army was already stationed at the foot of Kanbu in orderly rows. The colour of blood seemed to be reflected in their eyes as their weapons flashed. They were ready to kill – just waiting for their commander.

With the command flag in the air and the sound of the whistle, the mighty army parted for their commander to pass through.

Pingting observed through squinted eyes, somewhere in a tall building.

On his horse, Dong Lin’s main general, Chu Beijie carried his head held high. His confident figure looked more than ready to battle, his infamous sword was hanging by his waist and bow held against his horse.

He made his way through no man’s land to the Kanbu gates when he suddenly glanced up. She glanced

down and their eyes happened to meet, causing sparks. Immense excitement raged through both of them.

His army of a thousand horses and men wasn't afraid of anything, yet she continued to breezily sit inside the palanquin.

When Pingting felt the electric but fiery spark, her body seemed to have gone limp like energy had been drained from her limbs or as if her body was completely dry of blood. Her vision was temporarily blurred and her uncoordinated body was only stretched after clutching against a stone pillar.

Looking down, she couldn't see the soldiers standing at the Kanbu walls. She could only see those eyes which seemed to burn right through her.

Chu Beijie always made her lose her will, energy, and concentration. With a wry smile, she realised that she couldn't wait to see every inch of him once more. Little did she know that her body unconsciously took two steps forward.

"Be careful My Lady!" Cautioned Ruohan, the bodyguard ordered to stay by her.

Jolted out of her trance, she realised that she was standing at the edge. A few more steps could have sent her plummeting to her death.

"My Lady?"

Pingting came fully back to her senses. Right, she was the main military advisor. Kanbu's future, Bei Mo's future, even Yangfeng and her child's future were all in her hands.

The glow returned to her black pupils. She took brisk footsteps away from the edge to sit in front of the prepared ancient qin.

Calming her hands and spreading incense, she had done everything.

Pingting softly directed, "Pass on this command: continue to follow the plan."

"Yes."

From below, Chu Beijie's gaze never left the elegant figure in the palanquin.

She wasn't afraid of anything, just as he'd expected. Her indifference and bold movements were unique.

Moran finished his rounds before approaching Chu Beijie, whispering, "Duke, it really was her."

Looking up into the high palanquin, you could see her fine figure.

"She guessed it all right." Chu Beijie sighed.

"Should we immediately release the poisonous wasps?"

Chu Beijie was about to reply when he frowned.

Ping!

The sound of a qin floated down from the palanquin. Just one sound, crisp yet steady, moved the crowd like a needle striking their hearts.

Chu Beijie's strong gaze that could silence his army easily made a complicated expression towards the palanquin. His eyes were narrowed as he muttered, "The string broke."

Ping! Another sound was heard, this time resonating even louder than the one before.

"The second string."

Ping!

"The third string...that's your plan to force me in retreat? My Little Pingting." Chu Beijie eyed the figure while understanding flooded through his once dumbstruck expression. He held up one hand and called, "Pass on this order: retreat ten kilometres."

"Retreat?" Moran was shocked, almost horrified.

The other commanders exchanged looks then looked back at their main commander.

"Retreat." Almost spitting out the word, Chu Beijie looked at his woman one last time before turning his horse away.

"Duke has commanded, retreat!"

"Pass command: Retreat!"

"Retreat! Retreat!"

With their thundering footsteps, the entire Dong Lin army retreated like a tide.

Chu Beijie was at the very front of the retreating soldiers, his expression like usual, not conveying any emotion.

Chu Beijie rode for a moment then slowed to a canter, beside Moran.

Chu Beijie had galloped for some time before his pace slackened, letting Moran catch up.

"If we were to attack, Pingting would use her body to defend the city. If we were to release the wasps, she wouldn't be able to live."

"That was her plan?" Moran carefully chose his words, "In other words, if Duke wishes Pingting to be alive and safe, the poisonous wasps plan won't be used. She really is too brave, betting on her life like that. If Duke didn't care so much about the past, wouldn't she have lost her life over nothing?"

“That basically sums up that you know that I’m not as good as Pingting.” Chu Beijie laughed. “I would never have commanded the continuation of the attack. She is the main advisor of the Bei Mo army at the moment, the hope of the Bei Mo army, yet she doesn’t hesitate to sacrifice her body. This has one effect – it gives her soldiers courage. If I were to kill Pingting in front of the crowd and continue the attack on the Bei Mo army in hope to conquer Kanbu, her army would want to avenge her death and will attack us without reservation. Our loss then would be unimaginable. An army that is ruled by intense anger cannot be controlled by any normal strong force therefore I concluded that Pingting’s death would mean Dong Lin’s defeat.”

Moran immediately understood and he lowered his head, sighing. “Not only that, but if Duke did continue, it would give everyone the impression that you had used poison against a defenceless girl. It would ruin your reputation as the best commander and damage our army’s pride. The after effects could be even worse.”

Chu Beijie looked at Moran admiringly for a few seconds, before softly saying, “Although her counter-tactic was more psychological, I am relieved. If she didn’t completely trust in me, she wouldn’t have bet her life and use this tactic.”

Moran could hear that Chu Beijie was in a good mood, so he laughed. “That’s what they call ‘Damming.’ I mean, Duke promptly reacted and quickly told the army to retreat back ten kilometres. Although there are many men in this world, there aren’t many people who’d easily give up a city for a woman.” After laughing he sighed again as there was still something he wanted to know.

“Duke, please be angry with Moran for his bluntness, but there is still something Moran is unsure about.”

Of course Chu Beijie could guess what his second in command was thinking. The corners of his mouth lifted into a grin. “Even if there wasn’t a valid excuse, I would have never continued to attack the city. Losing Pingting would be more than just a lifetime of regret. A mere Kanbu could never compare to the loss of half a strand of her hair.”

Moran had guessed the true intention of his Master long ago but hearing it himself made him feel a rush of pride for the man’s honour. “Miss Pingting sure is one lucky woman to deserve such love from Duke. But, what should our army do? Stop and rest when we got to the ten kilometre mark?”

Chu Beijie had already come up with a plan as he gazed ahead. “In three hours, attack again.”

“Attack Kanbu?” Moran was dumbfounded. “Even if we don’t use the wasps, as long as Pingting stays in that palanquin, none of us are able to attack. Any stray arrow would kill her.”

“Well Moran, you know that I’m not as good as Pingting, but you should also know that at the same time, Pingting is not as good as me.” Chu Beijie’s confidence was obvious when he continued, “She’d only use that tactic once. The woman I like would never be stupid enough to continuously bet on her body every time our army attacks. I can assure you, she would have already thought of another plan by the time our army attacks again.”

He tossed his head back and roared in laughter.

“With her here, this Kanbu battle really has become much more thrilling. It’s certainly the most nerve-racking battle, I, Chu Beijie have ever been in.”

However, Moran looked as if he had a headache. “So, Duke has found a worthy opponent and victory is uncertain?”

“Do you remember the sword I left in honour of the five year treaty?”

“Yes, it was Duke’s favourite ‘Parting Soul’.”

“I must win this war as the price for the future of the Duchess of Zhen-Bei.” Chu Beijie seemed to be thinking something as he said, “Although Pingting is clever, her soul has departed due to me, Chu Beijie.”

With one last flick of the whip, they were gone like the wind.

Three hours later, the Dong Lin army was ready once more, their confidence even stronger than before. They were inspired by their main commander’s invincible figure and they were ready to win the last defensive attack against Kanbu.

Their flag noisily flapped in the air.

Chu Beijie’s expression was neutral. He was sitting on his horse as he calmly observed Kanbu.

A spy, who was sent, came with a report. “Duke, there are absolutely no soldiers in Kanbu. They must have escaped!”

This news rippled through the other generals and even Chu Beijie had to frown.

“Check again!”

“Yes!”

“Moran,” Chu Beijie picked his named out from the crowd, “Explain.”

Moran thought hard, then roughly explained, “The most important thing at the moment is to understand the movements of the Bei Mo army. If they are heading onwards Bei Yali, then we could easily catch up. If they have gone around Kanbu and are heading for the southern forests, then it’d be pretty bad.”

At this moment, the spy came again and panted in a somewhat high voice, “Duke, the entire Bei Mo army has entered the forest!”

Every one of the generals paled when they realised the intention of the Bei Mo main advisor. Although it was a bit risky, it was the best tactic they could possible do at this time.

“Once the Bei Mo army enters the dense forest, they can attack our supplies at any time, surrounding us by breaking off places we could retreat to and force the back-up soldiers we’ve been receiving from the King away. Even if we continue through Kanbu to Bei Yali, we’ll be on our own.”

Chu Beijie’s expression was very serious when he abruptly laughed.

“You had only just ruined my poisonous wasps plan when you immediately think of using the forests next. Well, well Pingting. How am I supposed to not love and respect you? You know that this tactic won’t stop my army. At most, it would only hold up for a few more days... so just what are you planning?”

After laughing, his expression was thoughtful once more.

“General Shenwei, take your troops and head for Kanbu.”

He waved his hands and someone passed a command flag to General Shenwei.

A frosty smile played on Chu Beijie’s lips, “I’m going to take ten thousand of the best soldiers to stop her army in the forest.”

“Please reconsider, Duke. The Bei Mo army is approximately fifty thousand in number. Even if it’s ten thousand of the best soldiers, it should be impossible to win.”

“Ten thousand is enough,” With all his arrogance, he chuckled. “How could you win the best woman’s heart without skill? My dear Pingting, I will make you lose in a way that you won’t have any regrets.”

The group of a thousand soldiers began their chase to find the Bei Mo army, towards the forests that covered several hectares, a place where not many had explored before.

Chapter 20

Chu Beijie led his troops through the forests and chose a somewhat open area to take a short break. He sent orders to get the best of his spies to check the movements of the Bei Mo army.

Together with Moran, they put up the central command tent and began studying the map.

“The forest surrounds the Kanbu for several hectares all around. Lots of places have yet to be explored. This means that the Bei Mo army couldn’t have gone in too much. The best places for them to stay are here, here, and there.” Chu Beijie’s finger moved, respectively pointing out the three mountain symbols on the map.

Moran agreed. “The Bei Mo army is approximately fifty thousand, so it’s very unlikely for them to fully disappear in this forest in such a short time. Our spies can definitely find out their location. However, if they really are living up high in the mountain to defend, this war won’t be resolved any time soon.”

Chu Beijie smiled at this and warmly asked, “Does Moran know why I chose to have ten thousand soldiers with me?”

With this hint, Moran’s eyes lit up with understanding. “Duke wants them to attack first?”

“The Bei Mo army and my army have been attacking each other for ages without result. They need a big victory to heighten everyone’s spirits.” Chu Beijie’s cheerful smile was unreadable. He turned back to the map and pointed at a tall mountain in the Southeast direction.

“If my analysis is correct, Pingting should have stationed troops there.”

“Duke just mentioned that only three mountains were possible and why is Duke so confident that they’d be on that mountain?”

“Although there are three possibilities, this place is the one that suits Pingting the most.”

Moran was about to ask again when a voice from outside the tent called, “Duke, I found out where the Bei Mo army is.”

“Come in and speak.”

The spy came in and reported, “The Bei Mo army is currently stationed on Mount Dianqing. It is the most dangerous, and according to the map, there’s a strong little river flowing nearby which seems to be the source of the several streams around here.”

Surprisingly, he then asked, “If Moran was the Bei Mo main military advisor, how would you attack my ten thousand soldiers?”

Moran was familiar with the battlefield and so he knew the answer.

“One of the basics of war is to secure a lodge near a water source so that soldiers and their horses can have easier access to water. If I were the Bei Mo main advisor, I would first find the source of the main streams, then add a poison that can diminish the enemy’s fighting spirit.”

“This plan could only work once thought as it has to be before I understand the geography. Pingting must have thought that I’m usually too busy with the soldiers and don’t understand these forests well. I always take notice of the geography when I go to a place though. I study as many maps as I can beforehand.” Chu Beijie couldn’t help but grin. “I predict she’ll poison the water tonight. Then, her army will be sent down and surround my ten thousand soldiers.”

Moran studied the expression on Chu Beijie’s face and realised he had a clear idea of what was going on. “Please make your command then, Duke.”

Chu Beijie lifted the tent flap to stare at the changing clouds behind a distant mountain. His thoughts seemed far away when his deep voice full of anticipation said, “Pingting may have a plan of her own, but she’ll think that the real battle will be under the mountain. There won’t be many troops at the top though, so we can take this opportunity to shock her.”

He snapped back. “Pass on this command: everyone must cut branches to each make a fake person, and they must wear armour. Tonight, station them outside the tents and make it look like we’re asleep, unprepared for battle.”

Moran hurriedly went outside to pass on the order.

The soldiers outside the tent immediately began to bustle into life. Not long later, Moran came back and informed, “Duke’s task has been completed.”

Chu Beijie nodded and snapped on his own armour. With sword in hand, he broke out the command tent.

“Get on your horses, take the Cloud Valley route and capture the Bei Mo generals!”

The entire army shouted ‘Yes!’ in reply and left, leaving empty tents and nearly nine thousand fake soldiers behind.

Ten thousand soldiers stealthily approached Mount Dianqing, camouflaged against the varied trees in the forest. Their stealth so great that even their breaths made no sound. They soon stopped at the foot of the mountain opposite of Mount Dianqing, ready to go through the ominous Cloud Valley route, where Pingting was.

Back in the Bei Mo army, everything was as Chu Beijie had thought.

Pingting had stationed most of the army near the water source. The tents were close to the summit and having the height advantage allowed clear views of the surrounding territory.

All of the other generals were with the rest of the army. At the moment, only Pingting, Ze Yin, and Ruohan were left in the main command tent. The three sat in a circle, studying the most concise map of the forests they could find.

“Great plan!” Ze Yin patted his leg in praise. “My Lady really is the strongest opponent Chu Beijie could have. It’s Dong Lin’s first time entering these forests, so they can’t be too familiar with this area. Adding poison to their water before they realize it, Ze Yin can then go and attack their quarters while they’re still poisoned. Humph, I hope Chu Beijie’s in the group of ten thousand so that he will understand that even the men of Bei Mo are strong.”

An idolizing expression was on Ruohan’s eyes as he said, “You understand Chu Beijie so well. My Lady will definitely become the most famous female army advisor in the four countries.”

Pingting’s expression didn’t change or rather, it looked more like an angry-hurt expression.

She sighed. “Generals, don’t be happy yet. The tactic Pingting just mentioned of may be successful against other people, but it won’t work on Chu Beijie.”

Ze Yin was having a pretty good laugh when she said this. He stopped. “Why’s that?”

“Chu Beijie is the strongest general in the world at the moment, and his way of thinking covers everything. Don’t forget that he did once send soldiers to capture poisonous wasps so wouldn’t it be very unusual if he didn’t send someone out to find out the topography of this area as well? Underestimating the enemy is a deadly blow to commanding officers. Pingting will cause a massive defeat if she concludes that Chu Beijie would be easily outdone with a poisoned water source.”

Ruohan paled. “Chu Beijie’s that strong? Then what should we do?”

Pingting’s eyes flickered back to the map. She smiled sweetly. “Once Chu Beijie finds out we’re on Mount Dianqing from his spies, it won’t take long for him to uncover the fact that we’ve poisoned the water. To be honest, the reason why Pingting chose this mountain was really to give him this false impression.”

After speaking so much and so energetically, Pingting broke off by inhaling a few deep breaths of air. Her

cheeks were flushed. She rolled her black crystal-like eyes once before continuing. “Once Chu Beijie’s thinks that he’s got my plan, he would make fake people and then look for a path that we won’t expect from and attack the supposedly, mostly empty commanding tents.”

Ze Yin and Ruohan knew that what she was saying was right.

Ze Yin’s beard bobbed up and down as he said, “We can station most of the troops close to the tents, then thrash Chu Beijie’s army.”

Pingting however, shook her head at this, “That’s not the best. Mount Dianqing isn’t the best place for an ambush.”

“There’s something I’d like My Lady to clarify.” Ruohan voiced the question in his thoughts. “My Lady said that Chu Beijie would look for a route that we won’t expect from. Which path is Lady thinking of?”

“Commander Ruohan has got the idea.” Pingting said and pointed at a route on the map.

Ze Yin and Ruohan both looked down and stared at it in shock.

Several moments later, Ruohan finally breathed out, “Chu Beijie actually dares to get ten thousand men to go through the notorious Cloud Valley Route. He’s really daring, huh. But then again, if we hadn’t been able to predict his actions, he would have definitely succeeded.”

“He likes to use bizarre tactics. This time, he’ll get a taste of his own medicine.” Ze Yin almost sneered. “I’ll immediately take some soldiers to round him from behind. I’m sure it will give him a nasty shock.”

He saluted towards Pingting, “Please give me your command, Main Advisor.”

Pingting smiled and held-up a command flag. Then, in a clear ringing voice like a black-naped creole, she commanded, “Listen, Main General Ze Yin, I, as main military advisor, command you to go down the mountain and block the enemy’s escape route. Surround them from the back, they should still be on the opposite mountain, Mount Bilei, at the moment.” After saying this, she felt a flood of unease so she lowered her voice. “Although we have more soldiers than Chu Beijie, surrounding them is more important at the moment. Do not attack without my command.”

“That’s a bit...”

Pingting handed it over nonetheless and explained, “Chu Beijie is Dong Lin’s main advisor and commander, and at the same time is the brother of Dong Lin’s King. Even if we capture him alive, the Dong Lin’s army will be lost.”

She took out another command flag and called, “Commander Ruohan.”

“I’m here!”

“Please lead another few hundred soldiers and gather at the other end of the Cloud Valley route and damage its rope bridge, so that even the Dong Lin army can’t get any closer to Mount Dianqing.”

Ruohan took the flag and replied 'Yes Ma'am!' loudly.

Pingting continued to order, "As an experienced fighter, Commander Ruohan, you don't have to come back here and report back once you've completed your task. You may march down the mountain to help Main General."

Pingting sighed in relief after making all of the necessary preparations. Her vision had gone blurry again. She knew it was from overworking so she sat down and closed her eyes to rest.

Most of the people had gone with Ze Yin. Their excitement had been obvious. They were ready to ambush their enemy, the army that had stressed and pressured them for so long.

Once the thundering sound of galloping horses passed, her surroundings quieted down.

Pingting calmly sat inside the command tent and woke up listening to the sound of silence, the sound of no sounds dancing in the air.

Another plot.

Plots in plots. She frowned and couldn't help stroke her sore eyebrows, a habit of hers.

She blinked.

The flashy command flags were really too bright to look at but after so much plotting, she had realised that they weren't part of a game. Each word she said could send several hundred soldiers, who still had families waiting back at home, to their deaths.

As for Chu Beijie, who had retreated ten kilometres for her, he had been wrong once more.

He would never be able to guess that Pingting could be so cruel, merciless.

Her eyes were dry but she couldn't even shed half a tear. Somewhere in the immense, dense forest, lay a battlefield. Pingting slowly got up and went through the tent flap to outside.

She found the forest of Mount Dianqing.

Beijie, it's me, it's me again. For Yangfeng and for the several thousand people of Bei Mo who've lost their homes.

Pain and regret rippled through her body, attacking her from the inside. She wished that this was all a dream.

"Could this be a punishment of my previous past life?" Pingting bit her red lip, not wishing to say more.

The potential bloodshed of her complicated plotting, how was it fair to the person who'd once so tenderly placed daisies in her hair?

She missed him, missed him! Pingting clutched her chest in pain but remembered that she was also the main advisor and the promise she made to Yangfeng and her unborn child.

Parting Soul – her Master was right – her soul had left. Her homeless soul wanted to be picked up by the wind and carried into the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence, where she could play “Heroes and Beautiful Women” once more.

It was really a pity that the wind nor the mountain wasn’t the place she wanted to be at for it only messed up her hair and did nothing to move her lonely spirit.

“They say a hundred years pass like a dream, but this dream is really long.” Surrounded by strong winds, Pingting muttered, “It’s so damn painful.”

Ze Yin was probably leading his army to where they were as the sky was slowly being dyed red.

Ruohan was probably still damaging the rope bridge.

Even if she feigned indifference – she knew it was too late.

Perhaps the two of them never had another chance to come back together.

Her thoughts almost made her laugh. Once the tactics were decided, there was no further use for an advisor. She was free to think about any rubbish she felt like thinking. In approximately two hours, Ze Yin should have successfully captured Chu Beijie.

If Chu Beijie was captured, he’d utterly hate her, a hatred that seeped from his bones.

Then again, he was almost always composed and would probably escape. Her heart beat wildly, as if his escape was a better solution, but she knew that he’d still hate her nonetheless.

Her heart darkened at the thought.

If Chu Beijie died in battle...Pingting had been constantly avoiding the thought but now she couldn’t help but to worry over it.

“You live, I’ll live as well. If you die, I’ll die with you.” When she had said that, she was in Chu Beijie’s arms, feeling like she could melt into water.

Pingting bit her lip into a sad smile. It was best if Chu Beijie died. Then she could easily give her own life to him and be together.

“Give me your life.” She only came back to her senses when she said this, only to realise that she was sitting on a patch of grass near the tents. Wary eyes of the few soldiers, who had been left to protect their main advisor, watched.

The sky was still changing when a bomb exploded not far from her. The air was temporarily filled with ashes. Pingting stood up and silently cursed herself for daydreaming again.

“Kill!”

“Kill! Kill! Kill! Kill!”

She wasn't directly in front of the command tent but could still hear the coming battle cry.

Pingting was horrified. She turned backwards, her eyes widening.

The Dong Lin army!

Impossible, how could this be?

“Kill! Capture the enemy advisor alive!”

“Duke has commanded for the capture of the enemy advisor alive!”

Chu Beijie's command flag appeared on the outskirts surrounding the camp and countless Dong Lin soldiers rushed out from the trees.

The sky was bloody red.

“Protect the main advisor! Protect the main advisor!”

The few remaining soldiers rushed up to defend, but since most of the army was with Ze Yin, their efforts were in vain against the massive Dong Lin army.

Her soldiers, soaked in blood, retreated towards her with their swords in hand.

“We must give up on the campsite! My Lady, get on the horse!”

Give up?

Lost, she had lost to Chu Beijie. It was more than just obvious.

She still lost in the end.

Pingting widened her eyes and dazedly forced onto the horse by her soldiers. A gaunt, blood-stained face popped into her view.

“My Lady! We must give up on the campsite! Run! Run!”

The hoarse, wild screams of the dying soldiers entered her ears. Pingting finally came back to her senses.

“Whip! Run! Run!”

Her ears were ringing, red pools of blood reflected in her shiny black pupils.

After her soldiers had gotten her on the horse, they went back and took up their fight against the intruders.

“Ahh!” Someone screamed again.

Pingting turned away, her horrified eyes meet with another pair of eyes that almost stopped her heart.

Beijie, do you want to kill me?

The moment their eyes met, Pingting's heart shattered. She never realised that a person's heart could shatter into thousands of pieces so easily, so quietly.

Through her tears, Pingting stiffened as she caught sight of Chu Beijie leaping over the fence, surrounding the campsite.

Against her will, she turned her horse and whipped it.

Run, run into this huge forest. Away from this person so I'll never see him again.

This felt so familiar to her; it was like a replay of back then.

The same actions taken and the same actions felt.

“Pingting!” Chu Beijie's deep voice came somewhere behind.

Pingting closed her eyes and whipped the horse again. The wind blew hard against her pale white cheeks.

Don't chase me; it's too late. There's nothing between us anyway. Bai Pingting has long lost her soul since she can't return to her old home in the Jing-An Ducal Residence nor your Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence.

Let's swear to the moon, never turn against each other.

Her tears blurred her vision, but she could clearly remember his comforting smirk from that time.

Never, ever coming true.

Tears blurred her eyes and she remembered his gentle smile from that day.

Whip, whip again!

She couldn't care less about the cold wind slapping against her face. Escaping from his field of vision, from the world he breathed air from, was the only thing she wanted to be at this moment.

But she could still hear the gallops of another horse – Chu Beijie was still chasing.

Pingting felt crazed and all she cared was galloping forward, even aimlessly.

Two people on two horses as the sunset dyed the sky light-yellow, through the forest, towards Mount Dianqing's summit.

The once crazed horse gradually got tired. When Pingting brought down the whip once more, the horse bellowed loudly and threw her off. She fell.

“Watch out!” Chu Beijie yelled.

Pingting slammed heavily into the ground, dazed for a brief moment. She gritted her teeth as she got up and finally realised why the horse had stopped. Not far, was an impossibly steep cliff.

She hadn't realised that Ze Yin had left such a clever horse for her, but she knew that she had to do something soon. She could never return to Chu Beijie's side with the status of an imprisoned enemy advisor.

Facing the steep cliff, Pingting calmed down. Standing close to the edge, she secretly looked back at Chu Beijie and smiled.

“This place is really pretty and Pingting is greatly inspired to sing. May Pingting sing a song for Chu Beijie?” She looked friendly enough, her eyes were bright as they followed Chu Beijie's movements.

Chu Beijie realised that she was acting too calmly and knew that something was wrong. He knew that the things he wanted to say were not appropriate at such a critical moment and if he did, this wonderful woman who was even harder to catch than wisps of smoke wouldn't hesitate to jump. His mind churned at the thought. He smiled back and softened his voice too.

“Gui Le's five year treaty is an agreement between Pingting and me. If Pingting jumps, the treaty will no longer be valid and I will lead the Dong Lin army to attack Gui Le immediately. Please reconsider.”

The moment he said this, Pingting's fake grin disappeared and she froze.

Chu Beijie took this moment to approach her and stopped in front.

The tears in Pingting's eyes moved but did not fall.

In a quiet voice, she whispered, “Why did Duke come?”

“For you.” Chu Beijie replied. Once he had secured himself onto the horse he reached out a hand and eyed Pingting.

“Get on this horse with me. If you do, you will no longer be a Bai but a Chu.”

Pingting shook as if she had been struck by lightning.

She raised her head and cried, “Beijie!” Despite the feelings of anger, she felt those sweet, salty, spicy, and bitter emotions that she had guarded so carefully, her uncontrollable tears were only ones of happiness.

His strong love only belonged to Bai Pingting after all.

Chu Beijie was quiet for some time before he sighed. “With you calling me Beijie, what's the point of continuing to attack Bei Mo?” He laughed, delighted.

He looked back at Pingting and warmth filled his eyes. He reached out. “Pingting, come here.”

Pingting studied the lines in his huge hand. Did she remember their warmth? They had once stroked across her hair, her cheeks, her tears, and smile...all from this very hand.

Her hand seemed to stabilize her world, as if her soul had returned and she was free to forget the King, Jing-An Ducal Residence, Gui Le, Bei Mo, and Yangfeng.

Can I really choose not to be a Bai?

She knew the answer as she looked at his hand.

Little by little she came towards him, through the countless mountains of their countries, through the fiery battles of their armies, and by forgetting her past.

From then on, Bai Pingting was no longer a Bai.

The danger in Bei Mo was solved and one day, Yangfeng would probably forget about Pingting and her child would probably never realise that his or her mother once had such a good friend.

Little by little she had gotten closer until finally she had touched those loving hands.

“Ah!” Pingting found herself being hoisted up from the waist the moment her hand tightened around his. In seconds her feet were in the air, but she was on the horse in his arms.

Chu Beijie’s familiar smile entered her field of vision.

“Hey Pingting, the moon’s out.”

She raised her head. It was true, the moon had risen. It was bright and curved, like a silver bowl that had laughed so much until it was permanently ruined its back.

“Let’s swear to the moon to never betray each other.” He spoke each word earnestly.

She studied his solemn expression and replied, “I swear to the moon to never betray each other.”

Under the cold moonlight, the leader of the winning Dong Lin army crossed the Cloud Valley route, carried his one and only woman back to the campsite.

“Why frown?” Chu Beijie looked down at the treasure in his arms that he had spent so much time trying to get.

Pingting’s frown loosened as she replied, puzzled, “A weird feeling I can’t really describe; it feels a bit like frustration.”

“Why’s that?” Chu Beijie softly kissed the top of her hair. “Losing and winning is common in fighting; it’s not embarrassing to lose against your husband you know.”

The Cloud Valley route lay ahead.

“Can...I ask you something about the battle though?” She was still his enemy’s main advisor up until a few moments ago. Even now, she couldn’t help but feel a little uneasy.

Chu Beijie’s expression didn’t change as he replied, “Sure.”

“How is Duke going to punish Ze Yin? He’s Yangfeng’s husband and I...”

“I don’t plan to punish him at all. That’s why I chose the Cloud Valley route.” Chu Beijie chuckled, “I knew that you would poison the water source and then attack our quarters, so I decided to act first and attack your campsite. As for Ze Yin, let him muck around in my campsite of empty tents and fake soldiers.”

Pingting stopped breathing as she realised why she had lost.

Her guesses were completely right, but she had forgotten one thing -- that his soldiers moved at an unusually fast pace.

His speed was indeed amazing, attacking several hours earlier than expected. She hadn’t remembered this when she first saw him because back then she was torn between misery and happiness.

Such a simple reason had caused her to lose.

Having said that, does that mean Chu Beijie has no idea that Ze Yin was on the other side of the route. Chasing after his disappearing soldiers?

The horse reached the Cloud Valley route’s rope bridge yet Pingting’s brain could barely work as she’s still in a trance-like state from meeting Chu Beijie. Keeping the Dong Lin army’s speed, they would have long crossed the rope bridge and hidden themselves in the forest before Ruohan damaged it.

No, Ruohan didn’t know that Chu Beijie had already crossed the bridge, meaning that he’d damage it according to the plan.

But...why did the rope bridge look perfectly fine?

During this puzzling moment, there was a nasty cracking sound and the bridge began to sway.

The truth dawned on Pingting like a strike of lightning. Ruohan had indeed followed the plan as he didn’t know that Chu Beijie and his soldiers had already crossed. It was damaged all right and it was still waiting for the enemy to cross it.

Chu Beijie didn’t fall in the trap as he came, but fell into the trap as he returned. It was just like a joke from the Gods.

Crack...crack...the snapping rope bridge gave off ear-splitting noises.

Pingting snapped out of her trance and yelled fiercely at Chu Beijie, “Go back! The bridge has been tamp---” She hadn’t finished before the rope bridge broke in half with a bang and Pingting’s body lost all support and her words plummeted with her body.

“Ahh!”

She was still in the air when she felt her waist being grabbed by Chu Beijie.

The wind whipped against their faces as he held tight.

The two squeezed their eyes and plunged towards the darkness, the dangerous valley that had yet to be recorded onto maps.

Chapter 21

The sound of wind strongly whipped in their ears. Pingting's eyes were tightly squeezed shut and could feel Chu Beijie's strong arms tightly clutching onto her. Although Chu Beijie fell later, he had flipped Pingting in midair so that his back was facing towards the ground.

There were several cracking sounds as the two fell through the canopy of dense forest. Snapped branches fell messily alongside them.

In the midst of the dense forest of tall, centuries-old trees, the cracking sound continued, although the two's plunge seemed to have been softened by the branches a little. Pingting and Chu Beijie tightened their grips, refusing to let go, as they knew they were approaching the ground rapidly and survival was unlikely.

Even if they died, at least they were together.

Thump! Thump! Two muffled sounds came from within the quiet, ancient forest. There was no predicted sound of bones shattering as they hit the ground, only two strange sounds. It seemed that the ground was soft like cotton and had significantly reduced the momentum of the two's fall.

Pingting and Chu Beijie opened their eyes, not daring to think that they were still alive. The two looked around and suddenly yelled, “Ahh!”, in both delight and shock. The surrounding trees grew an unknown type of berry. Due to its remoteness, its flowers bloomed of their own accord and no one picked its berries, leaving them to fall onto the ground. Year by year, the layer of wild berry and leaves has increased in size. At this time of the year, the wild berries had just ripened and fell once more, so the layer had been thick enough to save their fall.

The foliage that lay peacefully on the ground was like a landing cushion and had saved them as if fate decided so.

Pingting flashed Chu Beijie a sweet smile, they were in a place where no one had ventured before. The corners of Chu Beijie's mouth had not quite lifted, when they froze, revealing a strange expression instead.

Seeing his state, Pingting's face couldn't help harden as her eyes quietly studied Chu Beijie.

It was as if Chu Beijie had thought of his something and his expression darkened every passing second. Then, as if covered in a layer of frost, he spun out of the “fruit mix” and chose a less fruit-covered place to rest.

Pingting gaped as he walked away, staring dazedly ahead for a while. She saw that Chu Beijie had taken off

his war bag and that fresh blood was trickling out of his right arm, towards the ground. Realisation shocked her as she approached him, head bowed in shame. "I'll help you," she whispered.

"Go away." Chu Beijie grunted, cold and ruthless. He heard Pingting stiffen and take a step back, eyes fixed on himself. Chu Beijie ignored her and took out some expensive ointment, that he always kept nearby in cases of emergency, out of his battle bag. He spread it over his wound, grinding his teeth in pain and wrapped it up in a bandage.

"Cloud Valley route..." Pingting knew that he was angry and softened her voice, "I was the one who ordered to stop you from reaching our command tent, sorry for forgetting to tell you."

Chu Beijie didn't seem to be listening. His head was bowed too, as he continued to wrap up his wound on his right arm.

"Back then, the two armies were clashing and as the main military advisor, I had to decide on a tactic. I...who knew that you'd return that way too..."

Chu Beijie jerked his head, his sharp eyes piercing Pingting. In a cold voice, he said, "Coming or returning, I would've gone on that route either way. So your original...original plan was to kill me. Nice, nice." He stared at her even harder. How could he not be angry, first feeling delighted then realising that he might've just been killed by the very same person, his sweetheart?

He was no longer grinding his teeth as he said this, only smiling coldly. "Let's swear to the moon, never turn against each other..."

"Hah..." He repeated it twice, then tossed his head and laughed loudly, yet mournfully. "Geez geez, Chu Beijie, you're such an idiot!"

Pingting's heart froze at his words. Even back in the palanquin, facing the several thousand enemy troops alone, she hadn't felt cold. Her face was drained of colour beyond measure as she stammered, "I...I..." She had commanded Ruohan to break the Cloud Valley route, but hadn't expected him to still make it look untampered so that the enemy troops would plunge to their deaths without suspicion. However, if you stood from Ruohan's perspective, killing or injuring as much of the enemy troops was much needed in war, so it was understandable.

Pingting continued to say, "I...", for a long time. Looking at Chu Beijie, tears slid down her cheeks, yet she couldn't say a single word.

The moon hung high in the sky, the forest was a deathly quiet. Pingting's knees were shaky. Leaning on a tree for support, she slowly pulled herself to sit down, whispering, "You mustn't get a cold while you're injured. Is it okay if I light a fire?"

Chu Beijie sat cross-legged at another tree. He gazed far into the distance, expressionless. "When you light the fire, I wonder who'll find us first, mine or the Bei Mo army."

It was as if Pingting had been punched in the chest. It hurt so much that she could no longer talk. Her eyes blurred once more and she held them back with great difficulty. Her heart felt like it was melted, yet he thought she was more like the poison of a snake and scorpion than anything. She wiped her tears with her

sleeve and stood up against the trunk, turning to leave.

“Where are you going?” Chu Beijie heard her moving, though he still refused to look at her and his voice was still cold.

Pingting’s sighed, “Of course I’m going to find the Bei Mo army.” Not waiting to see Chu Beijie’s reaction, she walked away unhesitatingly.

Chu Beijie harrumphed once and only looked back after waiting for her to leave.

In the darkness, the light delicately bounced off a long hairpin in her silky hair. Yangfeng had given her the expensive, highly refined, jade hairpin.

Chu Beijie saw that she was only bending down in a nearby undergrowth, secretly relieved that she hadn’t gone very far. There were a lot of wild beasts and poisonous plants in the forest, meaning that most normal people wouldn’t be able to walk out safely. Having that thought in mind, his anger softened and his gaze refused to leave Pingting.

Not long later, Pingting walked back, her war bag filled with various things and spilled them out in front of Chu Beijie. There were some barely ripe fruits and a few roots of plants he didn’t know the names of. Chu Beijie had long turned his gaze away and it was back to the original indifferent expression.

Pingting sat down, picking up a fruit. “There’s enough wild berries in this forest to fill our stomachs, but as I’ve decided to kill you, it’s better if you don’t eat.”

Chu Beijie didn’t answer, so Pingting grabbed the roots that she’d just collected. “Of course these roots also have poison, it’s better if you don’t have them. It’s better to be a one-armed general then being killed by an evil woman after all.”

She pouted annoyedly, but Chu Beijie continued to show no interest, and she lost her enthusiasm quickly. She quietened, chewing a few berries, but quickly threw them away as they tasted bitter in her mouth. She sat back at the tree.

The forest wind was even wilder at midnight, chilling one’s heart.

The two were utterly silent, their gazes not touching. Pingting looked down at her feet and Chu Beijie’s face turned north. They were only a few feet apart, yet it felt like a thousand miles. No matter how hard they tried, they’d never get any closer and both were indescribably disheartened.

What had happened before the tampered route was like a dream. If it was a dream, they had woken way too fast.

Pingting’s eyes blinked wearily yet they refused to close properly, although they wanted to just collapse. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the unmoving Chu Beijie. Blinking again, tears dripped out silently. At first she rubbed them away, but after a while she gave up. *Let them flow*, she thought, *it seems to lessen the pain a little*.

Chu Beijie was listening to Pingting with his ears. His heart twitched at the sound of her crying, but he still

refused to look back, silently cursing himself that despite being part of the Dong Lin Royal House, he lacked perseverance. A moment later, he heard a muffled cough. She seemed to have blocked her mouth, letting only a barely audible sound through. He slowly turned around, unable to last any longer. He grabbed his robe that had been blown dry by the wind and softly tossed it. It flew and fell accurately close to Pingting's eyes.

Pingting froze and stared at the robe as if it was like some rare thing she'd never seen before. A long while later, she put it over her shoulders. Her sad eyes moved towards Chu Beijie and she bit her lip as she stood up. She picked up the roots on the ground and crept towards Chu Beijie.

She uneasily touched Chu Beijie's badly bandaged right arm. This man had almost never been injured and was therefore very clumsy when bandaging.

Chu Beijie's body was rigid and his expression was dark. Surprisingly, he didn't make any sound or action. Pingting sighed in relief and sucking on her lip, she undid his shabby bandages. Looking for a rock, she ground the roots and spread the paste evenly over his wounds.

Her right arm felt cool, an indescribably comfortableness. Pingting's nimble fingers tenderly touched Chu Beijie's developed muscles.

She continued to do so and then re-bandaged his wound. Pingting examined it with a somewhat tired expression, nodding in satisfaction. She stood up to go back to the tree.

Feeling her knees tighten, she realised that Chu Beijie was holding onto her ankle.

Pingting carefully turned around to look at him.

Chu Beijie didn't say a word, only pulling Pingting down to sit down with his left arm. His right arm was raised and lightly brushed across Pingting's face.

Pingting's trembling eyes looked at Chu Beijie's, which were barely visible in the moonlight. Lovingly obeying him, she leaned into his arms.

Baddump, baddump...Chu Beijie's thumping heart was in her ears.

Maybe it was her own heartbeat.

"Am I wrong?" Chu Beijie sighed, "Pingting, tell me."

"Should Pingting be pleased?" Pingting replied softly, "Whoever in this world could make Chu Beijie misunderstand?"

Chu Beijie felt helpless, a feeling he had never experience since birth. "How am I supposed to deal with you? What else are you lying to me about?"

"Will you believe me if I tell you?"

"Tell me, ever since becoming the advisor of the Bei Mo army, why have you been using delaying tactics?"

Are you waiting for something?"

Pingting's star-like pupils gazed at Chu Beijie as she replied honestly, "I'm waiting for the news from the King of Dong Lin." Feeling Chu Beijie stiffen, Pingting softly laughed, leaning comfortably in his arms. "Give Pingting one last chance. Let Pingting prove herself to you with the truth, Pingting would never do anything to hurt you."

Chu Beijie whispered, "What's going to happen to the Royal House?"

"No matter how bad the news is going to be, it's just a misunderstanding." Pingting's beautiful eyes shone softly in the dim light. In a sweet, dreamy voice she said, "When you get to Dong Lin, you'd know that Pingting doesn't dare hurt you and would never hurt the people around you. Beijie, go back to Dong Lin and see my real intention."

In the moonlight it was a beautiful scene, even the harsh forest wind, seemed to have softened too. The bitterly cold feeling had left, leaving an inviting warmth behind.

Nothing else to be said, nothing else to change.

Just like that, quiet in both mind and surroundings, hearts listened to hearts.

The two snuggled together, watching the moon fade as the sun rose in the east, listening to the cheerful chirping of birds.

Pingting seemed to wake up from an illusion that was beautiful beyond words as she lazily stretched.

"I wonder what's going on outside."

"The two armies have both lost their advisors. The Dong Lin army's thoughts will be a mess but as your Bei Mo army is waiting, they won't attack either." Chu Beijie calmly analysed, "Both sides are the same, one side doesn't know what's happening with the enemy, while the other is still at the foot of the mountain, searching for us."

They exchanged looks, thoughts back onto war.

Human voices were heard and Chu Beijie abruptly got up, backing away rapidly. He hid amongst a clump of trees, calling, "It's the Bei Mo army."

Pingting's expression changed. "If they find you, even I can't protect you." She put down the war bag and handed it back to Chu Beijie, urgently whispering, "I'm going to go out and they'll find me, so they won't have to do such a large-scale search party anymore. Stay hidden until you see the Dong Lin army's search party."

Chu Beijie grabbed her and kissed her fiercely. Lowering his voice, "When you get back, find a way to get rid of them. I'll wait for you in Dong Lin."

Pingting blushed, desperately studying him as she parted.

Bei Mo's search party were extremely delighted at the finding of their main advisor.

Pingting told them of her adventures since falling down and everyone said it was fate that she'd survived. No one cared about Chu Beijie, not to mention the Dong Lin army search party that would cause immediate bloodshed if the two were to meet.

Anyway, finding the main advisor was a great achievement already. She was immediately escorted back to the main camp.

At the main camp, Ze Yin personally led the other commanders to welcome her back. The other women serving the military were asked to help her with a bath. After putting on clean clothes and some fragrance, she was led to the main command tent, where Ze Yin and the others were waiting impatiently for her.

"Congrats My Lady for the complete victory! Chu Beijie's invincible streak has finally come to an end." Ze Yin laughed for a while, adding, "Pity Chu Beijie's actions were too quick, while we were still doing preparations, he had already crossed the route. Otherwise, we would've completely defeated the Dong Lin army."

Ruohan's voice was still disturbed, "If it hadn't been for My Lady's advice, we would never been able to turn the tides so that the enemy would give up, or we would be long dead because of Chu Beijie."

"What's even more surprising, is My Lady's courage to die in order to trap the enemy. That's something that even us, men, can't do." A strong voice interrupted, said Sen Rong, the commander of the right wing.

Pingting felt ashamed as the Bei Mo commanders had misunderstood. This misunderstanding was difficult to explain so she gave up. Blushing, she whispered, "My Generals are overestimating me, if I hadn't everyone's support, how is Pingting, a weak girl, able to do anything? Unfortunately there are lots of berries in the forest below the valley, so Dong Lin has probably not lost their invincible general." Hoping that the Dong Lin army had already found Chu Beijie, she remembered his last words, "I'll wait for you in Dong Lin." Her heart was no longer lonely, as if flowers had blossomed instead.

Ze Yin saw Pingting blush, but thought that she was feeling guilty for not being able to die with the enemy commander, quickly adding, "My Lady has already completed the task. Today morning, we received the news that the Dong Lin Royal Residence is a mess." He secretly thought *she's a woman who fell through dense forest and it was only luck that she managed to turn around, falling in a safe place. Such loyalty is incredibly rare in this world. Yangfeng was right about her personality, and her adamance to follow her every word, no matter how ridiculous they sound.*

Remembering his wife back at home, his heart sweetened and he smiled.

"The Dong Lin Royal Residence is in a mess so the Dong Lin army will get the news too. In other words, Bei Mo's danger will be solved as Chu Beijie will leave when he hears the news." Pingting replied assuringly.

"Is My Lady sure?" Sen Rong was still a little doubtful. A few days ago, he was still trying to fiercely defend Bei Mo with his last drop of bitter determination and now suddenly the Dong Lin army was just going to retreat?

Pingting gave him a certain expression, nodding with a soft expression. "General Sen, that is something Pingting, as the main military advisor, is most sure about."

"A withdrawal!" A voice yelled outside the tent. The flap was thrown upwards as a spy exclaimed loudly, "It's a withdrawal! Announcing to all the generals that the Dong Lin army has withdrawn! The Dong Lin army has withdrawn!" The sound rumbled at his excited announcement.

Ze Yin couldn't help being startled and took two steps forward, grabbing the spy by the shoulder saying, "Have you spied properly? Dong Lin has really withdrawn? It's not another trick?"

"It's true!" The spy looked up, teary eyed, in a voice that seemed about to cry in joy. "When our brothers' heard this, they couldn't believe it so they went and checked themselves before reporting to all of you, Generals. The Dong Lin army are retreating away orderly, along with their luggage. Even their general, Moran looks pressurised. They're really retreating!"

Although Pingting had long planned this, but when it really happened, it was still something incomprehensible. The once at stake Bei Mo was saved? The wolf-like, tiger-like, Dong Lin army were obediently retreated, without even doing one last nasty surprise attack? The blood-stained sky, the desperate eyes on the bloody battlefield, was no longer in sight?

Stunned silence in the tent, as if they couldn't believe the brilliant news. After a while of silence, there was a loud cheer as Sen Rong jumped up from his chair, tugging the cloak on his shoulder. He fell on one knee in front of Pingting with a thump, his hands clutching onto his blood-stained and dirt-ridden cloak. Gazing upward, he said, "This cloak has been with Sen Rong through extensive travels, please accept it My Lady."

Pingting could never accept it and stood up, waving her hand, "How could I accept such an important thing?"

"My Lady...Does My Lady look down on me? I, Sen Rong, owe my homeland and my family to My Lady, who saved them all." This man's face was unkempt and although his voice was as loud as a tiger, he was choking with emotion right now.

Pingting was a little startled and grit her teeth. "Fine, I'll accept it." As soon as she received the cloak in Sen Rong's hands, she heard another thumping sound within the tent. All of the generals had fallen onto their knees, following Sen Rong's actions.

Ruohan didn't wait for Pingting to open her mouth and said, "In all of Bei Mo, only us who have fought with My Lady in this battle of Kanbu know that it was thanks to My Lady that the tables were turned in this battle that would have caused Bei Mo to be conquered. Only we know the heart stopping hardships that you have tolerated for us. This cloak has all of our deceased brother's blood and all of our appreciation and admiration for My Lady. If My Lady doesn't want to accept it, please burn it."

Pingting was at a loss for words and her crystal-like eyes slowly rolled once. She turned to the crowd with a solemn expression and moved quietly towards them, taking the cloaks off their hands softly. Including Ze Yin's, there were twelve cloaks in total. She laid them on the table, studying the cloth soaked in blood of their allies and enemies. She sighed, "War is really too scary, I hope I'll never participate in it again."

"Dong Lin army has retreated, therefore the war has ended." Ze Yin stood up, the colour returning back into

his cheeks as he shook Pingting's hand, "The King has commanded for My Lady to return the command flag and go back to the capital, Bei Yali, to receive your reward." His expression was not without guilt.

Pingting nodded, "That's the way it should be." She took out the command flag and handed it to Ze Yin. She was once more free and at once relaxed quite a bit. Chuckling, she said, "From the capital city of Dong Lin to Kanbu, even on the fastest horses, the news would take at least five days, meaning that the Dong Lin King has probably been in a coma for five or six days." Seeing Ze Yin's stunned expression, she asked curiously, "What's wrong?"

Sen Rong shook his head, bellowing, "My Lady doesn't actually know the latest news? The Dong Lin Royal Residence is chaotic not because the Dong Lin King is in a coma, but because two of the princes, who are not yet ten years old, have been poisoned to death. Now the Royal House is all fighting over the position of the crown prince."

Pingting's eyes widened, as if her head had been cracked open by lightning, and her world felt shaken.

Her ears buzzed and she dimly saw that the commander was opening and closing his mouth, but couldn't hear a word.

"What did you say..." She weakly croaked out the words, her throat parched. Pingting cried, coughing out fresh blood in shock. A blinding white light flashed in her mind and an overwhelming darkness surrounded her as she fell.

Chapter 22

It was hot, causing sweat to drip continuously from faces.

"Give Pingting one last chance. Let Pingting prove herself to you with the truth, Pingting would never do anything to hurt you."

She was still in those arms, smiling upwards.

"Pingting doesn't dare hurt you, and would never hurt the people around you."

"I'll wait for you in Dong Lin."

Let's swear to the moon...

Never turn against each other...

"Geez geez, Chu Beijie, you're such an idiot!" And the shrill laughter that followed spread pain through her ears.

It felt as if someone had ripped open her skull, tearing at the nerve cells with nails, even biting with sharp teeth.

A dream, it had to be a dream.

Hot too, as hot as lava.

This was a dream, but she couldn't wake up. Pingting was within the dream, slowly munching on wild berries. It seemed that the berries were ripe with a nice red colour on them, but each one was bitterer than the last. It was miserable.

Why so bitter?

Why are they this bitter?

This is a dream, an unwakeable dream.

The flashy carriage was trotting towards home. There was no command flag on top and the curious Bei Mo onlookers did not know that the person who'd saved their country was inside — a woman, a woman who didn't even belong to Bei Mo.

She was once part of Gui Le, possibly Dong Lin but now, she probably no longer belonged to herself.

"I'll wait for you in Dong Lin."

Wait for you...

Their mumbled conversation and eyes filled with love, was as soft as that night's moonlight.

But it was just a dream, an unwakeable dream.

But she had to wake up, to see who had ruined her. Ruined Bai Pingting so easily. Ruined everything she'd so painstakingly waited for.

She gritted her teeth and struggled with all her hate to push open, her heavy, heavy eyelids, little by little.

Light leaked into her eyes, stabbing sorely at them. She opened her eyes wide, not wanting to succumb to the glare. She mustered all of her strength to stare hard at the person in front, as if she'd continue to stare at her until her eyes were cracked.

Main General's wife, Yangfeng.

She was already back by Yangfeng's side, lying on the bed that she had once spent the whole night chattering to her. The silk pillow was still soft, still just as gorgeous as before.

Yangfeng, who had been waiting by her side for several days, was absolutely delighted to see Pingting open her eyes but when she looked at Pingting's expression, she suddenly felt scared and shivered. "Pingting, you're finally up." Those words were usually easy to say, but these felt caught in her throat after seeing Pingting's expression.

"Who did you give the anaesthetic too?" Pingting's voice was hoarse.

"The King..."

“Did the King see anyone else after getting it?”

Yangfeng bit her lip, suddenly asking, “Why did you just say it was an anaesthetic? Although it can’t kill adults with a strong build, it’s enough to kill a child. It doesn’t even need to be much, just a little would do.”

Pingting’s heart felt so twisted and her bone-thin fingers desperately clutched her heart. She closed her eyes for a few moments, then opened them again, mustering some strength into her voice. “So you gave the anaesthetic to poison two of Dong Lin’s princes to death? Yangfeng, are you that cruel? Didn’t you think about doing more good deeds so your unborn child would have a more blessed life?”

This seemed to stab at Yangfeng, who stroked her convex belly while taking two steps back. She slumped to her knees, tears brimming. In a quiet voice, she said, “I took the anaesthetic to the Royal Residence, but the King only called for me several moments later. He asked me if I knew that it could poison young children. The King said that the King of Dong Lin being in a coma wouldn’t actually cause Dong Lin to be in a mess, but if their two young princes were dead, then they’d be in a mess for several years. Pingting, I was imprisoned in the Royal Residence and couldn’t pass any messages. Really, I couldn’t pass on anything! Ze Yin...Ze Yin wasn’t at Bei Yali either...” She had been living in fear for many days of her life and at that moment, she couldn’t hold back anymore. She started to cry.

“Yangfeng,” Pingting propped her upper body up with much difficulty, her black hair hanging to one side of her gaunt face. Barely managing to get out of the bed, she shuffled towards Yangfeng, pressing down on her shoulders. She stared into her eyes, asking, “Yangfeng, who told the King of Bei Mo about the other properties of the anaesthetic? Tell me, you know right?”

“I...” Yangfeng raised her eyes to meet Pingting’s, her face full of tear stains. She shook her head vigorously, “Don’t ask, Pingting...don’t ask.”

Pingting continued to stare at Yangfeng for a little longer, her eyes momentarily brightening with understanding. She turned back, her piercing gaze no longer, only sadness and disbelief in her eyes. She held her breath, hesitatingly spitting out two words, “He Xia?”

Yangfeng couldn’t help but looked away.

Pingting helpless numb fingers loosened the grip on Yangfeng’s shoulders and leaned back on her knees. Her bloodless lips quivered for what seemed a long time, until they broke into a bleak smile. “Yeah, apart from him, who else knows about the other properties? We were the ones who compiled the prescription together to begin with.”

She remained dazed for a little longer, then as if remembering something, she started to struggle up. Yangfeng came forward to help her, but she gently waved her hand away, using a chair to help herself up instead. “Get a horse.”

Yangfeng saw that she was even unable to stand stably and made a strange expression, asking carefully, “Where are you going?”

“See He Xia.” Pingting’s white back teeth were grinding gently and her gaze was aimlessly in the distance. Her voice was hollow as she said, “I want to ask him personally...why did he do this to me?”

Yangfeng was silent for a while, finally sighing sadly. “You don’t need to go look for him. He’s in this General’s Residence right now. Ever since you came back, he’s been waiting for you to wake up.”

Chapter 23

He Xia came in from the arched entrance of the outside garden. He’d seen the sitting Pingting from a distance away, through an open window amongst the fresh flowers.

She was thin, so pathetically thin. Her face was so haggard, no longer like the always laughing maid in the Jing-An Ducal Residence, so gaunt that it was heartbreaking to see.

He Xia pushed the bead curtain away, quietly stepping into the room. In the last few days, he had been waiting for Pingting to wake up, by her side, until he felt shy when the physician said she’d wake up soon, two days ago.

He wasn’t sure that he’d be able to bear Pingting’s expression when she woke up. After some hesitation, he decided to leave the room when she was most likely to wake up.

Although it was something he didn’t want to do, there was no escape.

“Pingting...” He Xia called in a soft voice, approaching cautiously.

His smart and intelligent maid was before him but she was like a jade carving, no soul just body. Where was the delicate gem with the warm fragrance of a beauty? Where was the warmth in this corpse of the one who’d once leaned on him intimately, rode the horse with him, and admired stunning views with him? He Xia couldn’t help reaching out, wanting to touch her.

“Don’t touch me.” Her voice chilled his heart and the words seemed to be spat out through her teeth.

His fingertips stopped at the last moment, hovering in midair, as if they couldn’t go any closer. Pingting looked at him in the eyes, but it was like she didn’t see anything at the same time.

That gentle, sly, smart, curious girl was gone. He Xia could only see her freezing coldness, as well as a little puzzlement and distress.

He Xia lowered his hands. “Pingting, you’ve changed,” he said, his eyes downcast.

“Pingting is no longer the Pingting from the past.” Pingting smiled a little sadly, asking faintly, “Is Master the same Master from the past?”

He Xia faced her, studying Pingting carefully. The past was gone, swept away from the ends of the Earth in a moment’s time.

He sighed, full of mixed feelings. In a gentle voice he said, “Do you remember when we were children? I’d calligraph, while you’d grind ink. I’d sword dance, while you played qin. You’d follow me wherever I went, refusing to leave. When we grew up, whenever I went on an expedition, you always followed. At least half of my fame as being the Marquess of Jing-An is all thanks to you and your planning. If we could go back to

the past, that'd be awesome."

"The past?" Pingting seemed to have lost in thought for a moment, but then her eyes frosted once more. "That's right, when we made that drug, you were the one who told me that it could poison young children, but it isn't fair to them, so it should only be used as an anaesthetic, not to kill." Her voice was faint.

He Xia shuddered, so angry that even his voice started to quiver, replying coolly, "The Jing-An Ducal Residence still existed then and my parents hadn't been killed by spies yet."

Blood-red lightning seemed to tear her sky apart.

Pingting lost her voice, stood up abruptly, but fell back onto the bed as her knees buckled.

"The House of Jing-An has done so much for Gui Le and had already decided to give up everything to lead a peaceful life in the mountains. Who knew that He Su's spies were ordered to kill us at all costs. It's my fault in a way for splitting the group in two, and leaving my parents to the other group. He Su, if I, He Xia, isn't going to avenge for them, then I'm not human!" He gritted his teeth, his black pupils turned back to Pingting. In a soft voice, he said, "My parents are now gone and as I don't have any siblings, you're the only dearest person left to me."

Pingting was startled.

The Duke of Jing-An was gone...

The Duchess was gone...

The benefactors who'd helped her for the last eighteen years were gone. Without them, wouldn't she have become a little pile of bones outside the city, due to hunger and cold, long ago?

Could she really not be angry about what had happened to the House of Jing-An?

If so, then she should be able to forgive the new Gui Le King, He Su, who ungratefully plotted to burn his officials to death, causing her to end up in Dong Lin, meet Gui Le's worst enemy, Chu Beijie, who wrenched her heart to no end.

Her thoughts drifted a thousand miles and settled on the now scorched earth of the original Jing-An Ducal Residence. There, the loving Duchess first held her chubby hand while taking her to He Xia, who was looking down at his calligraphy. She laughed, "Look, what a likeable baby girl. Being left near the entrance probably means that you're fated to be with the Jing-An Ducal Residence. Xia'er, do you know what fate is?"

He Xia put down his pen, only laughing when he saw Pingting. "Don't move, just stand here. I'll draw for you, it's going to be pretty."

One stroke later, she became He Xia's personal maid, study buddy, playmate, military advisor and for a while, she almost became one of his concubines.

"Duke, Master taught me how to hold a pen."

“Duchess said that I’m better at qin than Master.”

“If you don’t properly study the Art of War like I said, I’m going to tell Duchess.”

The gentle sounds of laughter went, completely disappearing.

She reached out, but the fragments of the past dissolved through her fingertips. They couldn’t stay.

There was no turning back. If she wasn’t He Xia’s maid, then how could there have been such a plan, causing Chu Beijie to be completely ambushed, forcing him to have a five year peace treaty with Gui Le?

If Chu Beijie hadn’t sworn peace on behalf of the Dong Lin Royal House, then He Su would never be able to send troops to persecute them without worry, and perhaps, even the Duke of Jing-An would have never been ambushed by the King’s troops?

The events interlocked, causes and effects.

Thinking that much, Pingting’s chest felt hollow. She even lost her strength to be angry and in a depressed voice, she said, “It’s understandable that Master hates He Su, but why plot with the King of Bei Mo to kill two of Dong Lin’s princes? Say, if Dong Lin were able to resolve matters quickly, then Bei Mo will have to deal with the calamity afterwards.”

He Xia looked at Pingting pityingly, sighing, “No matter what Bei Mo’s future is, I’d do anything to keep you by my side, Pingting.”

Pingting stiffened, slowly gazing back at He Xia, smiling. “Master isn’t suspecting that my loyalties are leaning towards Chu Beijie right? Otherwise Pingting wouldn’t have left at her own accord back then, after forcing Chu Beijie into a treaty, to assure the group’s location was safe.”

“It isn’t the same as back then, can Pingting still go back to Chu Beijie side?” He Xia looked away, asking in a deep voice. “Can Chu Beijie still believe in Pingting’s words?”

Pingting wasn’t shaking as much as He Xia had predicted. She only asked, “The Duke and Duchess are now gone, what is Master planning to do now?”

“Take you away. We’ll live deep in the mountains and I’ll be nicer to you than ever before.”

Pingting’s crystal-black eyes stared at He Xia. For some reason, her energy came back to her and she slowly got up, eyeing He Xia as she walked closer, as if trying to commit every inch of him to memory. She looked into He Xia’s bottomless pupils, her face not far from his. Pingting stressed every symbol, “Can Pingting still believe in Master’s words?” Her mouth lifted slightly to a dark smile as she turned around, lowering her voice, “Ever since the day I left, Pingting no longer had any connections to the House of Jing-An. Mr He, please leave.”

The room was eerily quiet.

After a few barely-restrained, but still heavy-sounding breaths, she heard some heavy footsteps behind her.

The bead curtain shook. He Xia was gone.

Pingting had lost all of her energy, collapsing on the chair.

Apart from the wife of the Main General's and his child who were strangely worried, the rest of the servants in the residence were very happy.

The frontier was no longer at war and Dong Lin's army was gone. The Main General was amazing after all, worthy of being the tree-like protector of Bei Mo.

General Ze Yin's Residence, its people were all delighted as the Bei Mo King had sent a series of large gifts. Everyone knew that this was just a mere trifle. The King was waiting for Ze Yin to finish with the matters at the frontier and return to Bei Yali, to give him the real reward.

Yangfeng look bored at the gifts of gold, silver and lavish jewels in the small living room. She had had been worried about Pingting, who had been in bed for so long, but surprisingly she had become increasingly strong over the last few days. She drank all her medicine and ate food on time, nor was she crying. Yangfeng was much relieved that Pingting seemed to be steadily getting better.

More good news came in. A messenger from Kanbu reported the Ze Yin would return to Bei Yali soon.

Yangfeng clutched onto Ze Yin's letter, her heart thumping madly. She wondered what Ze Yin's reaction would be when she saw her belly, how happy he'd be. At least half of her worries instantly dissolved and she took off to the kitchen, making a few of her best dishes. She took them to Pingting's room.

"Why are you up?" Yangfeng put down the steaming dishes on the table and rushed to help her up. "I told you not to worry, you have to recover from your illness little by little. Ze Yin will be back in two days. I wrote to him, begging to get him to buy some good ginseng and bear bile on the way back."

Pingting shook her head. "I've rested plenty for the last few days, it's time for me to go."

Yangfeng was stunned, "Pingting, right now, you're..." She sighed, lowering her voice. "How can I not worry?"

"There's too much attention here, I can't stay too long." Pingting held Yangfeng's hand in hers, also lowering her voice. "We're sisters, you know everything on how I ended up here. I'm going to leave you some words, don't forget them."

Yangfeng's heart sank as she nodded, "Tell me."

"The political situation is changing and the four countries will be in a mess than ever before. The Main General has just achieved something amazing, so it's a good time to retire. And," Pingting hesitated, before sighing, "Be careful around the Marquess of Jing-An."

"The Marquess of Jing-An?"

“He’s not the He Xia we knew.”

The two both thought of the deceased young princes of Dong Lin at the same time and were silent.

Yangfeng looked at the cooling dishes out of the corner of her eye, only feeling a heavy feeling in her heart. Revealing sad expression, she said, “Are you really leaving?”

“Yes.”

“The world is vast, where do you plan to go?” Yangfeng clenched her hand around Pingting’s, then brought the other to tighten her grip. In a choked voice, she said, “How can I sleep at night, when I think of you, a wandering girl? There are people who want to capture you in Gui Le and Chu Beijie undoubtedly thinks that you killed his nephews.”

“I’m going home?”

“Going home?”

Pingting smiled faintly, gentleness and anticipation flashing in her voice. Slowly, she replied, “There’s someone waiting for me.” Lifting her hand, the wind swept her hair back messily, as she stood up looking out of the window in the direction of Dong Lin.

Just as they had promised each other.

Chapter 24

All of Dong Lin had switched to plain colours. Under the King’s Order, everyone, no matter nobility or ordinary peasants were forbidden to wear bright colours for the next three months. Clothing, curtains were plain and even bright signs that promoted wealth and fortune were ordered to be taken down.

The air was heavy with the hint of death.

Two of the princes, two of the King’s own sons, had been poisoned without cure. They were so young, not yet ten years old. They were not eligible to be buried in Dong Lin’s solemn, royal cemetery but had to be cremated according to Dong Lin’s traditions. Their ashes were to be thrown into the river, so that they could disappear into the earth.

Chu Beijie had received the bad news and had hurriedly taken the troops back home. Around fifty miles away from the capital, the waiting figure of the Senior Official of the Left Wing, Sangtan, stopped them.

“Stop!” Seeing the brown royal flag flapping weakly in the distance, Chu Beijie held up his hand.

The exhausted troops of a hundred thousand came to a crashing halt, their dust-ridden faces confused to see the worried faces of the imperial guards outside the Royal Residence.

“The King’s Order,” Sangtan was holding onto the yellow-cloth Order, saying, “The capital is currently mourning over the death of two princes. Hostile presences such as soldiers are difficult to explain therefore they must not enter the city. All of the soldiers and horses must stay behind and will be looked after by the

Duke of Fu-Lang."

The group of commanders dismounted, silent and listening. Only Sangtan's emotionless, well-articulated words could be heard in one's ears.

Sunset was approaching, skewing the shadows even more. A shiver ran up Moran's spine as he heard the Order and he secretly looked at Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie's face wasn't cold or warm. He took the King's Order with two hands and stood up.

Sangtan's expression was reserved, his hands hidden in his sleeves. In a kinder tone, he said, "The Duke is finally back. The Duke is the King's own brother, so please try to comfort him so that King won't ruin his health while mourning. The King told me to escort Duke personally into the city." He took a step back, showing that there were around fifty royal guards behind him. It seemed that after the prince was poisoned, all of the Royal Residence's servants had been changed. There was no one he recognised.

"Duke..." Moran was standing beside Chu Beijie and his voice was a little strangled. "The soldiers have left home for a while now and they were looking forward to coming home. Now that they're forbidden to enter, I'm afraid that some people might cause riot. I might just be over-worrying, but it's not good if a fight happens. What we should do, please, if Duke can tell us."

Sangtan's expression didn't change, just coughed once, saying to Moran, "Did commander not listen as I read the King's Order? They will be looked after by the Duke of Fu-Lang."

"Senior Official, it might just be Moran worrying too much, but army matters are difficult to predict. There are a lot of soldiers here, if something happens..."

"Shut up!" The wordless Chu Beijie suddenly interrupted with a low cough.

Moran stopped talking and lowered his head.

Sangtan was worrying about how to deal with Moran and seeing Chu Beijie suddenly speak, he quickly added, "It's rather late now. The King's still waiting, so please may Duke get on the horse to come with me into the city." He ordered someone to lead Chu Beijie's horse.

Chu Beijie had been controlling Dong Lin's military power for a long time and he didn't like flattery, so he'd always rebuke in their faces. This caused other nobles to both fear and hate him. He wasn't usually afraid of them, but this event was massive, as two princes had been murdered while he was fighting away at the frontier. If the army wasn't away, the enemy would never have been able to take this opportunity to murder. It was hard for the King to not suspect him. Moran was familiar with such ways of thinking and knew that he mustn't let the Duke go in by himself, so he said, "Moran and a few personal attendants will accompany the Duke into the city."

But he hadn't expected that this was exactly what Santang wanted, who chuckled. "Duke's other personal attendants don't need to accompany and enter the city alongside. The King also said that victory was almost certain with Bei Mo and will later handsomely reward all soldiers here. I heard that Commander Moran has also made great merits in this war. The King said to allow Commander Moran to enter along with the Duke of Zhen-Bei. The King will personally reward you."

Sangtan's smile was gracious, but the crowd's hearts sunk. His words revealed too little and it was hard not to take them to heart. Their hands moved towards their scabbards, while they turned to look at Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie seemed to have much difficulty to maintain his straight posture. The thin smile on his lips seemed sharp enough to slice his silhouette from the sunset. He was expressionless. Looking at the grand, distant capital, Chu Beijie's voice was light. "Sangtan, I have a question."

Sangtan's ice-cold voice was shocked. He was facing the deadliest man of the four countries after all, the strongest general of Dong Lin, who'd just returned from war and who had the command of ten thousands of men. If he said a word wrong, the Duke of Zhen-Bei could effortlessly crush him, a senior official, like an ant. He didn't dare make contact with Chu Beijie's sharp gaze. He lowered his head, "Please ask ahead Duke, Sangtan will most definitely answer if he can."

"Do you believe that I have anything to do with the princes' deaths?"

A tricky question to answer.

If Chu Beijie were to ask, "Does the King think that I have anything to do with the princes' deaths?", then Sangtan could act like a dutiful official, saying that he couldn't dare guess what the King was thinking and say that he was just an official acting on the King's Order.

But Chu Beijie's words were carefully chosen, asking exactly as Sangtan feared. Saying that he didn't know was a blatant lie. In other words, there were only two possible options if Sangtan didn't want to offend Chu Beijie. The truth or lie.

Of course Sangtan couldn't afford to offend Chu Beijie here, so the truth was definitely out of the question. That was as equal as giving up his neck for Chu Beijie's sword to slice through. However, if he were to say "Sangtan absolutely does not believe that Duke has anything to do with the princes' deaths," in front of all the soldiers, if they spread gossip that reached the King's ears, he might be punished for conspiracy if the Duke really was guilty. Even his family would be in trouble.

In that moment, all sorts of wishes flooded into his mind and although Sangtan was famous in Dong Lin for his constant calm demeanour, he was sweating profusely. His expression was pale as he stuttered out, "Duke...that's...that's..."

"Is this question that hard to answer?" Chu Beijie laugh but it didn't seem like one. "Senior Official of the Left, you only need to answer. Do you think I have anything to do with it, or not?"

Chu Beijie's piercing gaze swept across Sangtan, who took a step back. "I dare not...don't dare..."

"Haha..." Not waiting for Sangtan's reply, Chu Beijie raised his head and laughed, his face in an indescribable pain. After a while he stopped laughing, his expression serious once more. In a low voice, "Has the House of Zhen-Bei been fired now?"

Sangtan's expression was stunned. "No way! Who...who said such a thing?" His hands in his sleeves were shaking very badly.

Perhaps under this world, there was only one person, a woman, who could speak to the Duke of Zhen-Bei without paling.

Chu Beijie turned towards him, calmly eyeing him, then continued to look at the city. His expression seemed to have crossed the fifty miles and was already back in his familiar residence. Sometime later, he opened his mouth and sighed. "The little building is the most eastern part of the Residence. Outside there are flowers blooming while inside, there's a guqin." He continued to sigh for a little longer before coldly commanding, "Arrest him."

Sangtan felt numb with cold and hearing Chu Beijie's command, he forced himself to act. Moran had already pounced on him agilely as he started to raise the King's Order in his hand. He was just a scholar official and was no opponent for a seasoned commander. He was captured easily.

Sangtan was on the floor, trembling, both in shocked and afraid. "I'm just passing on the King's Order, yet you're rebelling like this." Some of Chu Beijie's personal guards forced him to stand, then tied him up.

Seeing Sangtan captured, his companions, a few dozen imperial guards also tried to escape. The soldiers, however, had a much faster reaction and surrounded them properly, swords out of their scabbards.

In just a moment's time, the welcoming party for Chu Beijie was tied up like steamed rice dumplings.

Moran pushed Sangtan to Chu Beijie's feet, reporting, "Duke, there's a short crossbow hidden in his sleeves. So evil, there's even a little poison on them. If they were launched from a close distance, most people wouldn't be able to dodge.

A muffled thump. The crossbow and arrow were thrown onto the sun-baked mud, sending a gentle cloud of yellow dust into the air.

Chu Beijie's gaze rested on Sangtan's head. Sangtan was trembling. His parents and wife, behind the city gates, had told him to never beg to live in front of Chu Beijie, or he would undoubtedly be killed. It would be better if he acted more stubborn, didn't change his original will. "Chu Beijie, you do know that once the two princes are gone, then the next in line for Dong Lin's throne is you? What a simple plan, how can the King just not see it? Let me tell you, the House of Zhen-Bei has been fired and everything you have once owned has been taken back by the King! It's such a damn pain that I'm just a scholar and doesn't know how to be cruel enough to pull that poisoned arrow on the crossbow."

Chu Beijie ignored his mad dog-like words, just frowning as he looked at dark green arrow heads. "This arrow, is it the King's request?" He asked faintly.

"Hmph! If it weren't for the King being your brother, he wouldn't have been unable to bear killing you. He hopes that you'd come to the Royal Residence to clear up any misunderstanding, if any, but how could I just waste all these opportunities to avenge for them?" Sangtan's face was full of remorse and anger.

Chu Beijie's voice was disdainful. "Once you shot the arrow out, no matter whether I died or not, you are in the midst of ten thousands of soldiers, so you'll surely die a brutal death immediately afterwards. You couldn't dare do it in the end, in fear of death, which is okay, but you even went as far to say such ridiculous words."

Sangtan's old face flushed bright red and widened his eyes like a frog. He rolled his eyes, but couldn't say anything to defend himself.

Chu Beijie's hands were behind his back, his eyes not even looking at Sangtan as he continued, "I really am one of the most suspicious people to the death of the two princes, but why would the King think that I'm the one who did it?"

Sangtan acted stubborn, refusing to say a word.

Moran coolly told him, "Senior Official of the Left has never worked with military troops and knows next to nothing about the rules of the barracks. When we meet uncooperative prisoners, they're stripped of their clothes and left to our brothers to have some fun, then tortured."

Sangtan's face paled all of a sudden.

There were no women in the army and this meant that the several thousand soldiers had to suffer abstinence for several months on end. Anyone could guess what "have some fun" meant. The torture was already bad enough, but if he was stripped to be shamed like that, even if he died, he didn't have the face to see his ancestors. He was trembling once more, no longer trying to be brave.

"Speak." Chu Beijie stood on the spot, as if nothing had happened.

Sangtan's sweat oozed out, resentment in his eyes as he glared at Moran. Through gritted teeth, he said, "Does the Duke really think that his poison plan was immaculate? The King got the spy immediately that night and after strenuous torture, he confessed to be a spy from Bei Mo. The person who'd given him the poison was a girl named Bai Pingting. Hmph, isn't that the woman that you loved?"

Moran was stunned and jerked his head to see Chu Beijie.

Chu Beijie was still as a rock, no one could see his expression. The army was quiet too, no one dared to cough. They stared at their general.

Under the shadow of the last of the dwindling light of sunset, Chu Beijie quietly asked, "Moran, what do you think of the current situation?"

For some reason, even Moran was so nervous that both his hands shook. He kneeled, in an alarmed tone. "If Sangtan's saying the truth, then it might be hard for the King to stop suspecting the Duke."

Suddenly, the plains were overcome with silence.

The other commanders in front noted every word of Chu Beijie and Moran's conversation.

"Do you believe that I'd kill the two princes?"

"No."

"Would the King believe so?"

Moran hesitated for a moment, then resolutely said, “The King would believe it. According to the royal hierarchy, if the King doesn’t have any sons, then Duke would be next in line. The person who put poisoned them was Pingting, who has connections with Duke. Now that the Duke also returns with the army, how could the King not suspect you?”

Chu Beijie raised his eyes to see that night had approached, that even the last scrap of light had gone. “You can see how much pressure the King is under. If we enter the city, we and all people related to us will be captured and killed, for the sake of Dong Lin’s peace. Even if I were the King of Dong Lin, I would do the same.”

Thump, thump. After a few thumps, all the people behind him were kneeling, face solemn.

Commander Shenwei said, “I don’t mind going into the city gates myself to convince the King that Duke is innocent. I can swear on all of my ancestors and living family that this is the truth.”

“I’m also willing to swear that Duke is innocent!” The crowd’s vows echoed in the heavy sky.

“You’ve accompanied me through battle for all sorts of years. The King is even suspecting me, so how can he not think badly of all of you? Going into the city only means immediate death. Our only two options are death. Either going into the city, it’s fine if I get punished, but the Dong Lin army’s spirit will be significantly diminished due to the lack of the main general. Even though Dong Lin is famous for many strong warriors in the past, perhaps now it won’t even have enough power to defend itself. However, if we don’t enter the city, the King may interpret this as rebellion.

Moran was the most loyal. He had been an orphan and had accompanied Chu Beijie since young. He clenched his teeth fiercely. “Entering is impossible, but not entering is impossible too. Since the King’s suspicious, he won’t forgive Duke. It’s a real dilemma. Another option is to take the troops and invade the city, after all, Duke is the next inheritor of the throne.”

“Invading the capital isn’t difficult as all of the best soldiers are under my control. That’s another reason why the King wants to eliminate me.” Chu Beijie shook his head, “But even if we invaded the capital, killed the King and took the throne, what would happen to the people of Dong Lin? Once the royal family is a mess, the peasants’ hearts are troubled and the officials will have varying opinions. Other countries would take the opportunity to invade as well. Do we really want Dong Lin to be slaughtered by an enemy country?”

That was enough to make Moran lower his head.

The crowd all knew that Chu Beijie had other considerations. They didn’t dare interrupt, just kneeled on the ground without a word.

The winds of the plain were ever more aggressive, causing the flag to beat against its pole yet the ten thousands of troops waited in silence, for their main general to make a decision.

“To harm me, she didn’t even mind revealing that she was the murderess. Even if it was in Dong Lin, she didn’t care at all...” He slowly turned back, the corners of his mouth hooked into a bitter smile. “Not only did she manage to send Dong Lin into chaos, even caused Bei Mo to be a sworn enemy of Dong Lin. Nice, nice tactic.” He laughed bitterly for a little longer, then stopped, his expression freezing in place. His gaze

was far into the battlefield of a thousand miles, an expression he would've been disdainful in the past. He shouted loudly, "All commanders, listen to my order!"

"Here!"

"Immediately attack the city. After taking out the city walls, don't attack anyone who doesn't resist. Shoo all of the peasants into their houses and tie up the nobles, and wait for further instructions." Chu Beijie barked out another order, "Commander Shenwei!"

"I'm here!"

"Once the city is captured, you lead ten thousand soldiers who are responsible for keeping order in the city. Station troops to monitor around the Royal Residence and the residences of important officials, strictly forbidding people to enter."

"Yes!"

"Commander Shenyong!"

"I'm here!"

"Once the city is captured, you lead twenty thousand soldiers and guard the city walls. Absolutely no one is allowed to escape, so that no news of the city's capture can be leaked."

"Yes!"

"Commander Shenwu, you come with me. Surround the Royal Residence when we fight our way in, to see the King."

"Yes!"

Despite the series of orders, Chu Beijie's expression was calm as he strategized. He had a faint smile on his lips as he glanced around at his generals. "This is for Dong Lin and for self-protection. Everyone remember this, this time isn't the same as previous attacks. The strongest soldiers are already on our side so the other guards should be intimidated enough already. It should be easy to get the city under our control, so kill as less as possible."

"We'll obey the Duke of Zhen-Bei's orders at all costs!"

Under the night sky, the black figures of the army quickly approached the capital city of Dong Lin, like a stealthy snake.

Chapter 25

Battle cries were heard on this night of a full moon. The King's own brother had decided to do something on this night to Dong Lin, just rebel ever so slightly.

The King of Dong Lin was standing at a high point of the Royal Residence, watching the dragon-like

flames, in the night sky, that were rapidly approaching. He heard the fighting.

“King!” A guard soaked in blood hurried over. “The Royal Residence has been invaded by traitors. It’s not safe to stay here, please escape King!”

The Queen and a crowd of family stood, faces drained of colour. The Queen was still wearing mourning clothes and had her head bowed gracefully. “He’s already killed my sons and now he plot to kill us. As of now, his troops are guarding the city. Where else can we go?” She turned to the King, kneeling while crying, “King, I’m sorry but I do not wish to suffer humiliation. As the Royal House is broken, please may King allow me to tie a noose.”

“No, King!” Many maids who had followed the Queen for several years knelt down, crying hard.

All of a sudden, the main room was full of crying sounds.

The King of Dong Lin slowly looked back, saying, “Chu Lei.”

“Chu Lei is here, King.”

The Dong Lin King pondered for a while, then suddenly asked, “How are the peasants?”

“King?”

“My younger brother, did he massacre normal civilians?”

“The rebel army entered the city and ordered everyone to stay in their homes. They’re forbidden to look outside too, so the soldiers aren’t entering the houses either. They didn’t plan to create much chaos so lives haven’t been lost.”

The King slowly nodded, asking another question. “What about the officials? Have the ones that don’t get along with brother been killed yet?”

Chu Lei could hear the sounds of battle approaching rapidly, but the King seemed to have no intention of hiding, seemingly wasting time here without a trace of expression. But he still had his duty as an official to fulfill, so he answered with a frown. “I heard that the officials’ residences have been guarded. The traitor knows the officials well and I heard that he captures one whenever he sees one. I don’t know where they’re being kept, or whether they’re still alive. King, time is precious, please leave immediately.”

“Where can I leave?” The Dong Lin King laughed bitterly. “I knew this would happen ever since ordering Senior Officer of the Left to meet Chu Beijie outside the gates. I trusted our brotherhood and gave him all the military power, so it’s sort of my fault? Alas, my Dong Lin is in imminent danger right now so I can only hope...”

He hadn’t quite finished when the clamour abruptly increased. It was as if the fight was in front of them, but it suddenly stopped.

Everything was so strangely quiet and everyone’s heart seemed to sink at the same time.

Bang! The door flew open and a small, trembling eunuch ran in, stuttering, “King, reporting to King....h-h-h-he...”

The Queen paled ever more, her heart understand the situation, but she seemed to have calmed down. She wiped her eyes and stood up, slapping the little eunuch. In a cold voice, she said, “Only report when something is important and when reporting, report clearly and precisely. What’s wrong?” She lowered her hand, her fingers clenched tightly to reveal her whitish joints.

Half of the small eunuch’s face was swollen, but his articulation really seemed to get better. “Servant should be punished, servant should be punished. Reporting to King, the Duke of Zhen-Bei wishes to see you.”

Although they knew that the Duke of Zhen-Bei’s troops had already invaded, but hearing his name right now caused the assembled crowd to shudder.

The Queen’s tone was mournful. “It’s better to come himself, so that he can personally kill his elder brother and his wife.”

“King!” The white haired Senior Official of the Right Wing, Chu Zairan, suddenly yelped, throwing himself at the Dong Lin King’s feet, crying. “Back then I begged King to have stricter orders on the Duke of Zhen-Bei, so that he would never rebel. King only sent out Sangtan because it was too heartbreaking for King to meet him personally. As Your Majesty can see, he has indeed caused much trouble for Dong Lin. Please listen to what I have to say and if King doesn’t listen, I’ll kill myself immediately beneath King’s feet.”

The King of Dong Lin sighed, “Why cry, I understand. The children of my beloved are lost, leaving a bunch of clues pointing at my brother. I was just temporarily blinded by the fact that he has led troops to invade the city, causing chaos. Thanks for the reminder Mister, but see, there’s no point in killing my two sons if he could’ve just taken me off my throne with his military power.”

“King!” The Queen was exasperated. “Doesn’t King believe that Chu Beijie has a true wild ambition? The person who killed my princes must be him. Why hasn’t King realised it by now?”

“By now, I’m no longer confused.” The King of Dong Lin lowered his voice to the Queen and looked at Chu Zairan, who was crying on the ground. He sighed, “But the political situation has changed and it’s impossible to recover. Go ahead and say whatever you wanted to.”

Chu Zairan’s body trembled and he gritted his teeth. “I’ll be bold, please Order to crown the Duke of Zhen-Bei.”

“What? Are you crazy?” The others were shocked, overflowing emotions.

“Chu Zairan, do you understand what you’re saying?”

“Mr Chu, please take that back. You must be too old!”

“I’m not crazy, King.” Chu Zairan raised his head at the quiet Dong Lin King, tears streaking out of his old eyes. “The four countries have been at war for many years, the Dong Lin army has attacked four times, causing deep resentment. Their army is very strong, while the rest of our country is weak, therefore if the army were gone, the first country to be destroyed is our Dong Lin. To protect our Dong Lin, please give up

the throne, King, to avoid further internal conflict. I...I know these words are traitorous and I know punishment is death, but I'm willing to die." He thumped his head against the stone floor for a few times and fresh blood increasingly spilled with every thump, until his head was completely bloodied.

White hair and bloody expression, fierceness in desolation.

The Queen, who was so used to scold others, could no longer bear looking at him either.

There was no sound in the main room. The small eunuch was still kneeling on the floor, though fidgeting. He shyly said, "King, the Duke of Zhen-Bei...is still waiting outside."

The crowd's hearts were inspired despite the silence in the main room. It was like the calm before the storm, separated by a heavy wall and who knew what hell was waiting after that wall came down.

The Dong Lin King sighed heavily. "Fine, get him to come in then. The Queen should go with the others to the back. Senior Official of the Right, please stay behind."

"King..." The Queen slowly breathed out.

"Queen, you may go."

The group of maids helped the Queen to leave, leaving only the King of Dong Lin and Chu Zairan in the large main room. Not long later, they heard the entrance being softly pushed back and the harsh light of fire entered their eyes. In a flash, the flame was gone and the large entrance was closed once more.

There was a person in front of them, in dust-ridden armour. His face was handsome and his presence was imposing. His hand was at his sword as he sighed, "Older brother must be feeling pretty bad, seeing Beijie." Yes, he was the Duke of Zhen-Bei, who the King of Dong Lin had given military powers to.

Seeing no response from the Dong Lin King, Chu Beijie chuckled sadly. "The feeling Beijie felt when seeing Brother's Order, isn't it similar to what Brother is feeling now?"

"As it has become a big mistake, then there's no point regretting it anymore." The King of Dong Lin looked away, faintly saying to Chu Zairan, "Senior Official of the Right, start drafting."

"Yes, King." Chu Zairan took up his pen, trembled for a while, then put down the pen. He had been writing orders for the King for decades and therefore had a lot of experience. He could even write a long scroll without pause, only stopping his pen when finished. This time however, the paper was full of his tears and blurred the characters many times.

Chu Zairan put down the pen and handed in to the King of Dong Lin with both hands. "King...please seal it..." His voice was choked.

The Dong Lin King looked blankly at Chu Beijie. Their brotherly relationship was affectionate and they always laughed cheerily at national affairs, who knew how the situation ended up like today. He took out the jade seal, the King's Seal and pressed it down on the Order. He gave the Order and the jade Seal to Chu Zairan, forcedly laughing, "Give these to the next ruler of Dong Lin."

Chu Beijie just stood quietly in the distance. He hadn't spoken a single word since Chu Zairan picked up his pen, as if he had become a statue due to a curse. His eyes were impossible to decipher as he studied every movement of the large hall.

Receiving the Order from the King with both hands, Chu Beijie was silent for a while, then suddenly raised his head, "Hey Brother, in exchange for the throne, could I ask for two things instead?"

The Dong Lin King turned to him, lips moving to form one word, "Speak."

"Brother just needs to promise to not pursue this invasion and let Dong Lin be like usual." Chu Beijie said, "As for me, I'm absolutely sick of this. I don't ever want to appear in caught again, please allow me to retire."

"Did you really think that I would agree to not chasing a traitor?"

Chu Beijie nodded his head, full of trust. "Condemning all of the traitorous troops with badly damage Dong Lin's military power, provoking greater evil. Brother must have wanted to avoid too many people losing their lives, so almost giving up the throne, right? Sigh, although I'm an incomparable general, even a Duke, I'm nothing compared to Brother's great heart."

The King of Dong Lin gazed at Chu Beijie, "What's the other thing that brother wanted?"

Chu Beijie's face twitched in pain.

"In the Zhen-Bei Ducal Residence, there's a small building in the east. On the table inside, there's..." he lowered his voice, "a guqin."

Chapter 26

The transfer of governing rights to Dong Lin had occurred twice in its capital city and only selected few understood the shocking events.

Early on the next morning, the peasants cautiously came out of their rooms. They had hid as requested all night. Despite the endless fire and sound of battle, the King was still the King and the Royal Residence was still the Royal Residence.

The staff was assured safety while the imprisoned officials were brought to the Royal Residence. The King of Dong Lin summoned them one by one, not scolding them but praising them, such as the Senior Official of the Right's draft had called for help instead.

Everyone knew what this implied and was beyond delighted.

Apart from a few who stubbornly resisted during the invasion, there weren't many injuries and deaths, but the King issued a pension for their families anyway.

The mighty Dong Lin troops remained behind, but the famous general, the Duke of Zhen-Bei, had already parted.

Out on the yellow-mud paths, a group of carriages, without flags, slowly moved ahead.

There were carriages and horses in the group. The riders' faces were distant, obviously unwilling, and light rarely seemed to enter their eyes. Two of the carriages in the middle were for women and children, while the other two's contents were unknown but they were seemingly heavy, as the tyres left deep tracks in the mud.

One of the carriages wasn't decorated very magnificently, but it seemed expensive enough, as its frame and its wheels were made out of extremely rare, good wood. Simple but generous.

After a long night, inside the carriage, Chu Beijie currently had his eyes closed.

Dong Lin's trouble was over. After this incident, the King of Dong Lin would no longer suspect him of killing the two princes.

But a father had lost his son, an older brother had lost his younger brother, while Dong Lin no longer had the general who protected the country.

Dong Lin would have to deal with the terrible consequences for many years to come. Even Chu Beijie didn't dare imagine.

But the poison came from her hands.

Chu Beijie lifted his hands, looking at the thick, thick calluses caused by wielding his sword too much. He remembered her hands, her slender fingers, white and delicate. Hands that touched the qin, picked flowers and could also minister poison.

"The most poisonous of all...is really a woman's heart after all?" He narrowed his inky black eyes.

Not wishing to let anyone see the depth of his eyes, he closed them, lost in thought. After a while, his breathing evened and gradually, he seemed to be sleeping.

The road was bumpy up and down, causing the carriage to jump. Step by step it moved, further away from the past.

The driver of the carriage seemed to have hit a rock and was momentarily caught off balance. Chu Beijie's regular breathing stopped and he straightened his back. Then, as if all feeling came back, he called, "Stop the carriage."

He pushed open the carriage curtain and his body began to shake.

On the side of the road, there was a delicate figure. One hand patted the horse while the other held its reins by her side, touching the tips of the uncut grass. Heaving the group stop, she turned to look at them, revealing a stunned expression, rather than shocked, when seeing Chu Beijie's face. She gently exclaimed, "Duke, Pingting has come as promised."

Not only Chu Beijie, but also the people travelling with him, was frozen like wood carvings. Bai Pingting's red mouth smiled breezily. "To be honest, Pingting has been worried for a while, as I don't know how to meet up with Duke, so I had to wait on the road. If Duke ended up passing Pingting, then that meant our

destiny has ended. I did also go to Dong Lin, but it seems that Duke no longer has any connection to it from now on.”

Chu Beijie’s gaze didn’t leave Pingting’s smiling face. He lowered his voice, “I realised.”

“Then...” Bai Pingting articulated her words clearly, “Bai Pingting is now a person of the Chu family.”

“A person of the Chu family?”

“Duke has forgotten? Let’s swear to the moon, never turn against each other.”

Chu Beijie’s repeated every word coldly, with a pause after each word. “Let’s swear to the moon, never turn against each other?”

Bai Pingting’s eyes were as pretty as their first meeting. “Has Duke forgotten our promise?”

“I remember.” Chu Beijie nodded his head.

“That promise still stands,” Bai Pingting gracefully walked towards him, holding up her hand. “Please let Pingting follow Duke to the ends of the earth, my honour is decided by Duke and my death decided by Duke.”

Chu Beijie eyed the familiar, small white hand in sight. He could easily touch it.

He had touched this hand no less than a thousand times, enjoying its touch while praising it. He remembered its warmth and its smoothness, agile and delicate.

He never thought about it before, but they were also a cunning pair of hands, that seemed to be able to flip clouds and beckon rain at will.

Pingting was not surprised or afraid, just stood obediently facing him. Just like before, singing about beautiful women and heroes and soldiers knowing fraud. Her crystal eyes were still able to talk, light shining in all four corners.

Chu Beijie was silent for a long time and he finally broke the silence, saying, “Pingting, answer a few of my questions.”

“Go ahead, Duke.”

“The drug used by the spy from Bei Mo, was he working under your command?”

“Yes.” Bai Pingting’s expression didn’t change, just articulating one word.

“You know that they were Dong Lin’s princes, my very own nephews?”

Bai Pingting looked at him, the light in her eyes flashed as she sighed, “I know.”

“Do you remember that you swore not to hurt my family.”

“I remember.”

“I, Chu Beijie, am not a man who’d give up revenge for his own family, just for a woman”

Bai Pingting could hear Chu Beijie’s anger and a sad smile played on her lips. “I understand. Pingting understands everything Duke says. As Duke wants to find Pingting, there’s no point in Pingting trying to hide, so Duke can do whatever he wants.”

“One final question.” Chu Beijie hesitated, sternly asking, “You knew that you’d die anyway, but why set a boulder to disturb my journey?”

Bai Pingting’s heart felt as if it had been stabbed. Her body suddenly swayed a little, while her talkative eyes quietly watched Chu Beijie. Her voice was sad. “Pingting is an idiot, but Duke is an idiot too. Even if I speak until my mouth’s dry, would Duke believe a word? Everything has already become a big mistake, we won’t ever go back to the way we were.” Not being able to say another word, tears slid down her cheeks and onto the ground.

Sunset.

There were no corpses on the dry yellow road.

A slender, silent figure joined the silent group of carriages and horses.

Chu Beijie realised that hands that hold onto both heart and sword, are not always without conflict.

Chapter 27 (Intermission)

Bei Mo’s first snow came in the middle of the November.

General Ze Yin chose this time to enter the Royal Residence, to report his retirement from military to the King of Bei Mo.

“Why so sudden?” The Bei Mo King was no longer interested in admiring the snow all of a sudden, as he turned to gape at Ze Yin.

Ze Yin replied, “The danger at the frontier has now passed, so Ze Yin should also fulfill his promise with Yangfeng.”

“No longer participating in military affairs so that you can accompany your wife till old, while watching nature unfold itself over the years, am I right? Such a gentlemanly promise.” The King of Bei Mo turned away, refusing to say any more. After a while, he finally added, “Does Yangfeng still bear a grudge over the poisoning of Dong Lin’s two princes.”

Ze Yin sighed heavily, lowering his voice. “A women’s kindness should not interfere with national affairs anyway. It’s not King’s fault.”

“So it seems that she still bears a grudge against me. Pity, nothing can replace a good friend.” The Bei Mo

King had bitter smile as he nodded, "What else could I say? Oh well, oh well. General Ze Yin, you may leave."

The Main General's Residence in Bei Mo, in the midst of snowy skies and earth, had its sign pulled away from above its main entrance, the sign that the King of Bei Mo had personally written.

Ze Yin's intentions in resigning had long been hinted within the residence as the crowd of servants had been with him for many years and were all fiercely loyal. Wherever Ze Yin went, they would follow, so even when news was proved officially, the Residence was calm like usual. Everyone seemed to have mutual understanding as they all packed their luggage themselves without being asked, getting ready to leave Bei Yali.

The snow continued to fall for seven days, no trace of stopping.

The road to leave Bei Yali was snowy white, while only a small group of carriages ambled on it. The carriage wheels pressed against the snow, leaving two long tracks.

One of the most decorated carriages in the middle, a small stove was alit. Yangfeng had her head lowered, looking at the baby in her arms. This child had far too much energy, just like his father, who only slept after much coaxing.

A sweet smile formed at her lips as she put the baby on a tiny blanket, wrapping him up carefully. Yangfeng softly sneezed as she sat by the window.

"Asleep?" Ze Yin moved in to face the two, carefully examining the sleeping child. He was used to picking up swords and killing, but seeing this delicate, newborn baby, he could only think that he would hurt him whenever he tried to cuddle him. He felt more afraid at his first time being a father than his first time being on the battlefield.

Yangfeng saw his expression and startled to chuckle softly, moving close to him, watching their child together. In a loving voice, she said, "Look at his nose and his little mouth. He looks just like a little Ze Yin."

"His face looks like his mother's." Ze Yin was joyous, "The son looks like the mother. He definitely has a promising future. Yangfeng, it's all thanks to you."

Yangfeng was stunned. "Thanks to me?"

"It's all thanks to you, otherwise, how was I going to have such a cute son?"

"What are you saying?" Yangfeng was both angry and pleased. Not wanting to wake the baby, she tugged at Ze Yin's sleeve. The two sat quietly on their seats, which were cushioned with thick fur. Yangfeng lowered her voice, "Does Husband think I'm too stubborn?"

"Why would I?"

"Yangfeng forced Husband to leave his post as the Main General, even leaving Bei Yali to settle down elsewhere. Yangfeng forced you to leave even though the snow hasn't stopped, not to mention that Qing'er

isn't a month yet either. Having said that, that was far too stubborn of me."

Ze Yin laughed, his voice deep and soft, while his large, rough hand stroked Yangfeng's face. He asked, "Is there anyone else who could force me, Ze Yin, to retire? Retirement and leaving Bei Yali was all your wish. As it's your wish, I would definitely do so, willingly." He paused, his voice softening. "Besides, I know that you're still feeling uneasy about what happened to Pingting. Although the rewards from the King kept coming, you seemed even more on edge each time."

At the mention of Pingting, Yangfeng's face turned sorrowful. In a low voice, she said, "Yesterday night, I dreamed of Pingting. She was standing in front of me, not smiling, not speaking. I reached out to touch her, but she was like a shadow, something I couldn't touch. Ze Yin, I had to beg Pingting to think of a plan for Bei Mo."

"I know." Ze Yin pulled Yangfeng into his arms, pain flashing in his eyes. "My country, Bei Mo, owes her deeply, yet they pushed all of the blame for killing Dong Lin's two princes on her. Ze Yin is far too ashamed to face her."

"She's not willing to clear the misunderstanding either." Yangfeng was distraught. "Ever since you searched up where Chu Beijie was living, I've already sent someone to pass on my letters, telling her to clear up everything with Chu Beijie, that He Xia was the one who killed Chu Beijie's two nephews. But she hasn't sent anything back to me."

"She should be under house arrest right now. Could the letters we sent, weren't delivered to her, but were collected by Chu Beijie's people?"

Yangfeng shook her head, "Isn't it better for Chu Beijie to see them? But the Dong Lin army doesn't seem to be pursuing He Xia right now, meaning it's highly likely they still don't know what He Xia did. I reckon Chu Beijie is too arrogant, that's why he's not stopping or peeking at Pingting's letters. I'm just afraid, what if Pingting doesn't plan to plead innocent?"

Ze Yin's thick eyebrows creased, not understanding, "Since she knows that He Xia has changed, why is she still willing to be punished in place of him?"

Yangfeng seemed to feel a little cold, shifting her position in Ze Yin's arms, until she was able to hear her husband's heartbeat more strongly. Her gaze was fixed on the sleeping child not far away, as she sighed softly. "Being disappointed in someone is one thing, but hating them is another. Pingting knows this very well, that the moment she says the truth, He Xia will immediately become the most wanted criminal of Dong Lin. How is that any different from personally killing him? Their friendships built over the past fifteen years won't be broken so easily."

Yangfeng's voice got softer and softer, as if her thoughts were even more problematic than before. She hesitated for a long time, before continuing, "I'm just worried that since she's so clever, instead of trying to solve the misunderstanding, she'd use this to test Chu Beijie's feelings for her instead. Sigh, just how can a man's heart be tested?"

Ze Yin heard the sadness in her tone. He was very worried that she'd get sick, as it hadn't been more than fifty days since she gave birth and there were too many worries on her mind. Patting her shoulder lovingly, he assured her. "Don't think about it too much. Although I've retired, it's not like I don't have any

influence. If Pingting has any needs, we can definitely help her.”

“I hope that god will protect Pingting.” Yangfeng pressed her hands together at her chest, praying.

Ze Yin’s group of carriages advanced slowly on the snow-covered ground, while the sky was full of fireworks outside the Royal Residence of the country of Yun Chang.

The Royal Residence was covered in red silk, while the maids were all dressed in grand, festive gowns, flowed in and out of the room like water, bringing in all sorts of colourful desserts.

The joyful sound of drums travelled from within the Royal Residence to the outside neighbourhood, causing the peasants of Yun Chang to gather and discuss.

“Princess is going to marry!”

“Heh, our Yun Chang finally has a prince consort?”

“There should’ve been a prince consort ages ago. Although the Princess is pretty clever, but as a woman, it’s not that good to meddle with politics too much right? It’s better to find a husband and settle down, giving birth to a son too.”

“Hahaha, that makes sense.”

“Having said that, our Princess has quite a good taste. Ever since the King died, the number of people proposing suddenly increased, almost enough to trample down the Royal Residence’s door. The Princess refused everyone, but chose this one.”

“Yeah! Yeah! As expected of our Yun Chang’s Princess, to have such good taste. With him as the Prince Consort, our Yun Chang no longer has to be afraid of Dong Lin’s Chu Beijie and Bei Mo’s Ze Yin! Hahaha, come, let’s cheer for the Princess and the Prince Consort with a little wine!”

The mellow wine gushed freely out of their containers.

Gui Changqing crossed through the crowds of butterfly-like maids, while wearing a heavy yet grand courtier dress, towards a small, peaceful building in the western part of the Royal Residence

The most influential maid of the Yun Chang Royal Residence, Luyi, happened to be standing at the entrance, while instructing two maids. “Get the gift, Double Golden Phoenix Belt, sent a few days ago. Also, go get some dry hawthorn and remember to place them in the red plates. There are two plates, each one gets exactly ninety-nine slices of dry hawthorn. Remember, ninety-nine slices, no more, no less. I’m making this clear, today is an important day, if any of you dare make a mistake, watch out for your leg.” She said this all in one breath and when she turned around, seeing Gui Changqing, she hurriedly smiled. “Senior Official Gui, please come in, Princess has been waiting for a while, but Senior Official just hadn’t come yet. It wasn’t going to be long until the Princess was going to welcome My Lady.

Gui Changqing smiled modestly, stepping into the room.

The smell of incense lingered in the room. Although outside was full of joyous music, here, it was all just

unclear, residual sounds. Reaching the curtains, she saw a thin figure sitting alone in front of the mirror through them.

Gui Changqing already heard Princess Yaotian's familiar, crisp voice before she drew back the curtains. "Please come in, Senior Official."

Gui Changqing pushed the curtains back, walking until she was standing in front of the mirror.

The Princess in the mirror had long surpassed her usual glamorous appearance. A coronet, studded with many gems, had been placed neatly on her head. Below, she was wearing a chain of pearls, that wouldn't stop shaking, but none of this managed to block out the shining light in her eyes.

Princess Yaotian put down the eyebrow pencil in her hand, studying herself carefully in the bronze mirror. She joked, softly, "Senior Official, has Yaotian dressed up prettily enough?"

Gui Changqing looked at her attentively, nodding. "Absolutely stunning." There was a pause. Then, as if there was something she had to say, she gave a long sigh. "Princess is finally going to marry. The little girl who liked to make all of the Residence's maids run after her, until they were breathless, is soon to have a husband. Time sure flies. Is Princess happy?"

"Happy and worried at the same time." Yaotian looked at herself in the mirror. "When Mother was still alive, she said that marrying was like reaching into a black hole. There isn't a way to tell whether what you pull out is a rare treasure, or a deadly snake. Senior Official is the most loyal official of Yun Chang's Royal House. If it hadn't been for Senior Official's help ever since Father died, I would've never been able to deal with national affairs. I want to ask Senior Official a question, so please give me a truthful reply."

Gui Changqing replied in a distinct voice, "Go ahead, Princess."

"When I chose He Xia, the officials and peasants were happy but why was Senior Official so worried about it for several days?"

Gui Changqing hadn't thought that Princess Yaotian would ask such a thing and she looked a little stunned, only replying after much thinking. "The King died early, not leaving a son. Princess is ruling the political court as a woman and everyone understands that whoever marries Princess will be the Prince Consort of Yun Chang, who can do whatever they want to with Yun Chang. That's why I was constantly warning Princess to be careful when choosing a husband, not someone useless who would bring Yun Chang to its destruction."

"He Xia is useless?"

"Though Princess is perceptive too. He Xia is currently framed and hunted by the King of Gui Le, and needs a refuge."

"Although his family is ruined now, he did come from a good family, so his behaviour is extremely graceful, not to mention his rare talents. In this period where the prospect of war is constantly hanging around, like a cloud, warriors were the most valuable of all. Princess agreeing to marriage at this time is like bring a steel barrier to our Yun Chang. But..." Gui Changqing shook her head, her voice soft, "He's too powerful, too ambitious. It's not going to be easy to keep this man beside for long periods of time."

Princess Yaotian lowered her head, thinking. In a hesitant voice, she asked, "If so, why didn't Senior Official tell me in the past? I would always consider Senior Official's opinions."

"Even if I said so, would Princess' decision be changed?" Gui Changqing sighed, "I've been serving for twenty years and have known Princess since birth. How could I not see if Princess had already hardened her heart to iron, firmly decided such a thing?"

Princess Yaotian sucked her lips, thinking, then smiling. "As expected of Senior Official. It's true that I wouldn't have changed my opinion. From the moment He Xia stepped into the Royal Residence, I had already decided that I wouldn't marry anyone else. What kind of girl doesn't want to marry a man, who's worthy of being called a hero? Not to mention that there are far too less heroes, even if you're lucky to meet one, you don't dare to hope for too much."

She stood up, the accessories in her hair jangling.

"But Senior Official is right too, I have to work hard to keep that man by my side." Yaotian turned around to look at Gui Changqing, revealing an innocent smirk. "Senior Official, you can help me think of how to keep He Xia's heart."

Gui Changqing bowed, "I'll put all my heart into it."

"Very good." Yaotian shuffled towards the door, facing the other side of the Royal Residence, muttering to herself. "The music's nearer. He Xia...he should've already reached the entrance of the main hall right?"

In yet another distant country, in the Royal Residence of Gui Le, He Su was silent as he looked at the grey sky.

The Queen approached from behind, inquiring, "After seeing the letter, King seems to look worried. Was it really bad news?"

He Su nodded. "Princess Yaotian of Yun Chang has agreed to He Xia's marriage proposal and they will get married today."

The Queen gaped. "Princess Yaotian actually agreed to marry He Xia, who has nothing? Why is she so unwise?"

"It's a good decision." He Su looked back, briefly meeting the Queen's eyes. "He Xia doesn't have nothing. His biggest riches are inside himself. In this world, lots of people have external riches, but those with internal riches are rare. Princess Yaotian saw, and took fancy at this point."

The Queen could hear the accusation in his voice and lowered her head obediently. "As King is annoyed, I shall play a piece," she whispered.

"No need." He Su stood by the window, locating the general direction of when the Jing-An Ducal Residence once stood, muttering, "What else have I done wrong? Gui Le's two renowned qin players no longer belong to Gui Le now."

Yangfeng had left exactly because the Queen had believed in gossip, and had decided to dispose of her. Hearing He Su mention her, the Queen's heart squeezed in shock. "That was due to my stupidity. I'm willing to accept all punishment." She raised her long dress and kneeled down, head lowered.

He Su was silent for a long time. Another thought seemingly crossed his mind, as he suddenly began to laugh. "You may get up, Queen."

He turned around, helping the Queen to stand. His voice was a little pleased as he said, "Yangfeng's qin skills may be spectacular, but she's just a woman of the harem. If we were to talk about strategising, she's nothing compared to Bai Pingting. Never mind losing Yangfeng, I'm surprised that He Xia would give up on Bai Pingting for some temporary interest. He'll have to pay a heavy price in the future."

The Queen was suddenly suspicious, "Is Bai Pingting really that amazing?"

"Has Queen met Bai Pingting before?"

The Queen tried to recall her. "She rarely entered the Royal Residence, I've only seen her once or twice. She doesn't like to talk, and her looks are average."

"Bai Pingting may not be a beauty, but she has a different sort of charm, causing people to want to stay with her, have her forever." He Su looked at the Queen, a trace of a smile on his lips. "Men can easily fall in love with beautiful women and it's easy to be entertained by them, but just how many women are worthy enough so that a man would want to stay by her side forever?"

"Doesn't that mean He Xia has given up?"

"He Xia will regret it, maybe he has already regretted it, but what use is that?" He Su narrowed his eyes, a harsh light seemed to rise from the pits of his pupils. "I won't let him get Bai Pingting back so easily."

After dinner, He Su stayed behind in the main hall, sorting national affairs. The Queen excused herself.

Bumping into the corner of a side hall, the Queen stopped, wiping her tears away with her sleeve.

The Queen's nurse, Mother Cheng Xiang, who happened to accompany her, was shocked. "What's wrong, Queen?"

"The King's fallen in love."

"With who?"

"Bai Pingting of the Jing-An Ducal Residence."

Mother Cheng Xiang was silent.

When the King ordered to get rid of the House of Jing-An, he had privately requested for He Xia and Bai Pingting to enter the Royal Residence. It was strictly ordered that if the House of Jing-An and their followers reacted, they were to be killed immediately. Only one person had to survive, not to be injured.

Bai Pingting of the Jing-An Ducal Residence.

The wedding chamber was well decorated and inside, the bride's cheeks were shiny red.

A red scarf softly fell from to the ground, as if picked by a light breeze, and a handsome man entered her eyes.

One of the noblest men of the four countries, the famous Marquess of Jing-An, was standing in front of her.

"Princess."

"Prince Consort."

Their whispers were barely audible and when their eyes met, her hearts wouldn't stop thumping messily.

He Xia untied the red flower strap on his chest and took off Princess Yaotian's coronet with both hands, smiling while sighing. "He Xia didn't expect that ever since being homeless, that he'd be so fortunate to earn the Princess' favour, when no one else was willing to help him. God really isn't unfair to me." He smiled gently, taking in Yaotian's quiet face. "Perhaps Princess has other worrying things in mind?"

Yaotian giggled guiltily, replying, "I'm just thinking, if the House of Jing-An hadn't perished, then would Yaotian still have been blessed enough to be the wife of Husband or not." Tears dripped from her eyes and stopped, hanging down from the frame of the bed. She sighed, "It's the night of the wedding chamber and the man in front of me is talented both literarily and militarily, a true hero. It's just like a really good dream, so I'm a little afraid that it's just a dream."

He Xia frowned, "Why say that Princess, do you not believe in the loyalty in He Xia's heart?"

"Oh, slip of the tongue." Princess Yaotian turned back, smiling sweetly at He Xia. "If I didn't believe in Husband, then why else would I have vowed to always stay together?"

He Xia's starry eyes studied Yaotian carefully, his two pupils were like pools with a magical pull and it made Yaotian feel as if she was sucked in. He was on one knee in front Princess Yaotian, as he affectionately touched her hand. Raising his head, he said, "Don't worry Princess, He Xia will swear right now that there will be one day where I'll make Princess become the noblest woman in the world and then personally crown the Princess as the Queen of the Four Countries."

Princess Yaotian's eyes suddenly brightened, "Does Husband really have such lofty ambitions?"

He Xia tossed his head back and laughed for a long time. "Life is too short, if I don't do something great, how could I feel worthy of my parents who raised me?"

Princess heard that his voice was brimming with confidence, sounding extremely heroic. Secretly delighted, she softened her voice. "Since Husband is so complacent, presumably already having a plan to unify the four countries."

He Xia stopped his laughter, thinking hard before replying, "The first thing to do, is definitely to forbid my life rival from returning to being the strength of Dong Lin's Royal House."

Princess Yaotian had been in charge of politics for a while, therefore she recognised the most important people of each country. She interrupted immediately, “Chu Beijie has already retired to the mountains, not interested in the government, but he’ll definitely leave the mountains if Dong Lin is in trouble. How does Husband plan to break Chu Beijie’s blood connection to the Royal House of Dong Lin?”

He Xia secretly admired this girl’s wit, for knowing the situation of the four countries so well. He flashed her a look of approval, clutching onto her willow-like waist to help her up so that they could both admire the far away moon outside the window.

“There’s only one scenario where Chu Beijie would never return to the Royal House of Dong Lin. Even if their Royal House is in danger, Chu Beijie would never dare interfere and will just sit back and watch.”

Princess Yaotian frowned for a long time, then shook her head. “I have absolutely no idea. In what scenario, would Chu Beijie leave his family?” Her beautiful, intelligent and wise eyes were trained on He Xia, searching for the answer.

A little hesitation surfaced on He Xia’s handsome face. He gazed at the moon, shaking a little. Then, as if remembering that Princess Yaotian’s question was still unanswered, he slowly breathed out, whispering, “That is, when Chu Beijie, of the Dong Lin Royal House, loses his most beloved woman.”

“Chu Beijie’s most beloved woman?”

“Her name is...” He Xia’s lips seemed to be as heavy as gold. They spat out the familiar name with great difficulty, “...Bai Pingting.”

Princess Yaotian was shocked, and she sucked her lip in response.

Pingting, Bai Pingting.

The real mastermind of the Jing-An Ducal Residence. He Xia’s most beloved maid.

Rumours said that Bai Pingting was the manipulator behind Dong Lin’s forced treaty to Gui Le for five years of peace.

Rumours said that Bai Pingting was the one who saved Bei Mo, and killed Dong Lin’s two young princes.

Rumours said that Bai Pingting was currently being imprisoned by a very furious Chu Beijie.

Just what kind of woman are you really?

Translation Notes

- Bear Bile (23): Nowadays, raw bile can be sold for as much as \$24,000 (USD) per kg, approximately half the price of gold – according to Wikipedia. Basically, it's another one of those cruel industries. Anyway, it's often used in Traditional Chinese Medicine.
- Damming (19): This word is stolen from a chess tactic (not that I play chess of course). It's probably not the correct translation and probably more of an inference from me. But it does sort of make sense. Damming means to cut off lines of support or attack for one or more pieces and thereby punching large holes in the attack or support chain. From my understanding (which is too basic to win a proper game), it's something like moving/forcing the opposition's piece (usually by sacrifice) to a more advantageous place for you. That opposition's piece is also generally an important one for attack or defence. Pingting "damns" (blocks) Chu Beijie's attempt at attack by sacrificing her body. If Chu Beijie was mean enough to kill her, then all the wasps would attack her (because the Sanhua arrows and maybe because she has some Sanhua near herself too), instead of attacking the Bei Mo army. This means that the attack chain is basically useless and the after-effects are pretty bad, as stated in the novel. Chu Beijie is nice and retreats this time, meaning there is no use for their attack chain right now and it therefore dissolves. This buys the Bei Mo army more time for a proper counterattack. Whatever Chu Beijie decides is advantageous to Pingting's side, the Bei Mo army. This was probably more of an "Art of War" reference (famous military treatise), but that's virtually impossible for me to understand. ./
- Double (golden) phoenix (27): Symbolic of happiness to a couple.
- Eunuch (25): A manservant or slave that has been castrated.
- Flag of command/command flag (16): Most kings don't go to war, so they choose someone on behalf of them.
- Heroes and Beautiful Women (20): The song Pingting always sings. I don't think it's ever been given a name, so this is it.
- Hundred years pass like a dream (20): Pretty much what you see. It's said that life passes so fast, like a dream (most dreams are happy). Pingting disagrees with this because she thinks time passes really slowly (she is upset after all). It's often used to describe ironic situations.
- Joke from the gods (20): It's said that gods like to play very nasty, mean jokes on humans.
- Sanhua trees (18): Completely fictional.
- See his ancestors (24): Paying respects to your ancestors is considered to be a very important practice in China. It is often believed that you meet your ancestors when you die and if you lead a good life, you can join them. Modern Chinese atheists might not believe this, but they may also use it as an expression when they feel that their guilt/shame will follow them for life.
- Tie a noose (25): Commit suicide by hanging.
- Watch out for your leg (27): Punishment for servants, when they make errors, is being whipped on the leg.
- Who else can oppose Chu Beijie in this world? (17): Probably an ambiguous statement. Maybe she thinks that only she can oppose Chu Beijie correctly and/or thinks that she (herself) can't oppose him and likes his figure of "an unopposed man".

OTHER COMMENTS

Some comments I had during translation...

King “dawang” and Prince “wangzi” were easy to translate, which led a problem to use of “wangye” and the “-wang” (suffix). This person could be either be royalty or from a normal family. Hence “duke” from the English peerage system seems to do the trick as “a prince can be a duke”, and it solves the problem of naming the duke’s son(s)...Besides, there have been dukes in Chinese history (according to Wikipedia lol) though they use a different character.

A few proofreaders also had a few questions, so I'll answer them here...

“I doubt if Pingting is actually not good looking. Perhaps the standard of beauty is different in this era?” (Ezzie Eliza)

Technically she's more “plain” than ugly. As she spends most of life around kings and dukes, she'll be compared to their women, who are supposedly the most beautiful women in the country. That'll make a plain person seem ugly in comparison. There isn't that much about her appearance I reckon (just her dancing eyes, white skin, petite figure), but white skin and petite figure are stereotypically common attributes of Asians. Her eyes are definitely her best physical feature. Somewhere, it does say that she was “undoubtedly a beauty; ignoring her face, nose and mouth” (don't remember exact quote). That probably means that her nose was a little flat. I doubt her face was chubby, but maybe the shape was not perfectly oval enough.

Also, the person who illustrated the novels and drew the manhua, is more of a BL artist. She doesn't have much experience with drawing girls. I did read somewhere that she had great difficulty drawing the main character. It's highly likely she drew Pingting prettier than intended. In the 7-volume version (original) and the one of the 2-volume versions (can't remember which year, but it's the dark pink/purple one), the illustrators are different and Pingting looks significantly plainer...probably a little ugly too?

For the disbanded drama, Liu Yifei was picked to play Pingting. She's considered to be a very pretty actress. I read on baidu that the Chinese fans also thought that she was a little too pretty to be Pingting, but then that's not unusual because it's hard to advertise dramas with a plain or ugly main character. The drama still never aired though.

Besides, it's not like people can't fall for plain girls. Most of the descriptions of her come from Chu Beijie's perspective and people do say love is blind ...^^

I don't think the standard of beauty in this era has changed much. White skin, petite figure, high nose and big eyes have been common standards of beauty in China for a long time...

“On chapter 23, when Pingting confronted He Xia for the killing the Dong Lin Prince, she was reminiscent about their lives at the Jing-An Ducal Residence. We know from the story that Pingting was left at the door of the House of Jing An. So basically they were like together for the moment she's entered the residence and according to Pingting, it was 18 years but Yangfeng said it was friendship of 15 years.” (awesomejou)

Yup...I think Pingting's eighteen. Don't remember where I saw that though (I don't think in the novel). Unfortunately, that conflict is actually in the text. I think it's because Pingting didn't actually become friends with He Xia until she was 3. The benefactors may have looked after her for eighteen years, but she didn't meet their son until later (when he was older and be able to do calligraphy). I think He Xia's around 20 too.

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